ActEU Activating European
Citizens' Trust in Times of Crises and Polarisation

Reporting on Deliverable D5.1 – An integrated report on recommendations deriving from national ActEU Youth Democracy Labs

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An integrated report on the recommendations deriving from national ActEU Youth Democracy Labs

Executive Summary

A major aim of the ActEU project ("Activating European Citizens' Trust in Times of Crises and Polarisation") is to actively engage with young European citizens and integrate their perspectives into the research process. The ActEU Youth Democracy Labs were designed for exactly this reason. In an interactive process, ActEU partners and participants engaged in a process of co-production and developed policy recommendations for policy-makers and the educational sector. The perspective of European youth was taken seriously and their expertise in the issues concerning their every-day-lifes as well as their (political) education used as a valuable input. In 17 Labs, 338 participants produced over 400 recommendations. For this report, the recommendations have been systematically categorized and analysed.

ActEU profits from the Youth Labs in manifold ways. Firstly, they allowed the project to tap into knowledge which conventionally does not find its way into the project and research processes. It allowed the ActEU partners to involve over 300 young European from over 10 countries in thinking about the challenges addressed by the project. Their insights are highly valuable and feed into the policy recommendations to be formulated by the project partners.

Secondly, the labs further ActEU's efforts to activate European citizens. Participants were given an opportunity to actively think and deliberate about participation, representation, polarisation and political trust, as well as about how young people are prepared for their role as democratic citizens in a multi-level polity. Participants were given the necessary background information, time, space and setup to discuss issues they might not routinely think about. The feedback received from participants was very positive and interventions highly valued.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the ActEU Democracy Labs. Firstly, there is high demand for more and better political education, including these forms of interactive deliberation. When taking into consideration the recommendations for the educational sector, a clear demand for more and better political education already from a young age is expressed by the participants. At the same time, participants demand the issues relevant for them to be taken aboard structurally in political education.

Second, not only do our participants want their interest and positions better reflected in the curriculum, they also want a greater say in politics in general. A major focus of the policy recommendations was allowing for more citizen involvement. This pairs well with the demand for more information, which should prepare students for this politically active role in society.

Third, participants demand more direct and indirect contact between politicians and young people. Both, via respective formats in an educational setting, as well as through improved communication and outreach by politicians directly. This can again be interpreted as a demand by participants to be heard and take an active role in the political sphere.

Policy recommendations:

Following these findings, we develop three core recommendations for policy-makers. First, political education in all levels and age-groups should be redesigned so as to speak to students needs. It should include information on current political systems (beyond the national level) and forms of participation. Political education should be provided regularly and, possibly, mandatory.

Second, our young participants want to be heard. Policy-makers should engage in a more meaningful conversation with young people. Several means for doing so are possible: Using educational institutions for exchange, i.e. through group visits to political institutions and actors or vice-versa or direct engagement via social media.

Third and related, young citizens demand more means of involvement in politics and political decisions. While more and better political education should provide the information needed, institutional structures must provide the means for meaningful participation.

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1 Introduction

The ActEU project set out to combine conventional research with inclusive co-production of output targeted at society at large. Different conventional forms of research were conducted in order to understand the concepts of participation, representation, polarisation and trust in Europe and their mutual relationships. These formed one basis in developing the outcomes of the project, below others a toolbox for remedial action including policy recommendations. A second approach was opening up our research process and involving European citizens. Based on the premise that input from citizens matters and enriches our research endeavours, the goal was to involve citizens, in this case specifically young Europeans, in processes of thinking about the challenges addressed by ActEU and of producing tangible output providing means for policy-makers to constructively work towards improvements.

For this second approach, we build on a rich tradition of citizen involvement in research and policy-making processes. The terms used for these forms abide: Citizen science, social innovation, co-creation, and co-production to name but the most prominent (Vorberg et al, 2014). While they all have slightly different meanings and conceptual bases, they share the assumption that an increasingly complex social reality needs innovative approaches for knowledge creation also in academic research. The concepts, of which we will use co-production as an approximation for what has been done in the democracy labs, refer to the joint creation of knowledge, services, or policies by diverse actors, including experts, practitioners, and lay citizens, which "entails working *with* communities and providing opportunities to learn and reflect from their experiences" (Albert et al, 2021, p.122, italics in original). This collaborative approach stands in contrast to traditional models where knowledge or policy is primarily generated by a select group of specialists without input from the wider public. From a citizen science perspective, not only scientists but all involved actors hold some kind of expertise relevant for the research and knowledge production process (Korte & Weissenbach, 2023).

While ActEU's main research foci target society as a whole, younger generations have received specific attention when it comes to research on political trust and specifically polarization recently. One aim of the project has hence been to involve young people actively in the project and, at the same time, specifically cater to the needs of this societal group in our research output, importantly the toolbox on remedial action. This toolbox is conceptualized to enhance the democratic environment in Europe with a view on the problems identified in the research process, specifically regarding increasing polarization on salient societal issues. Below others, the toolbox involves policy recommendations targeted at policymakers in general and specifically towards the educational sector. The early and meaningful involvement of citizens in research and policy design processes is crucial to the creation of tools and strategies that are both practical and socially responsive (Campos et al, 2024). In a cooperative process, civil society and European citizens at large were to be involved in our working process to widen our perspectives and enrich the project's output.

One key mechanism for engaging younger citizens in this process was the development of the **ActEU Youth Democracy Labs (YDLs)**. The labs had two main purposes. On the one hand, they were conceived as a means of systematically gathering insights, perspectives, and concerns from young people across Europe, thereby integrating youth voices into the project's working processes. On the other hand, they should provide an interactive environment in which students could not only discuss the main challenges identified in our project, but themselves take the lead in choosing the specific focus and discussing the EU multi-level political system critically, contributing to active citizenship education (Eis, 2015, p.134). For the Democracy Labs, this meant moving beyond simply

consulting students, to actively engaging them in the intricate process of formulating concrete policy recommendations, thereby positioning them as active agents in shaping their educational and political futures. This should not only activate participants and allow them to grow into fulfilling their role as active democratic citizens, but allowed us to profit from their insights and expertise and incorporate it in our research processes.

In designing the labs, ActEU researchers worked together with partners from the ActEU civil society network to develop a workshop setup that guarantees active deliberation by the participants. The network consists of 20 civil society representatives and was a major source of inspiration and expertise throughout the project.[1] Members represent six different areas of expertise – gender equality, citizen participation, climate, youth, multi-level governance and migration. The result was a detailed workshop structure and template which will be introduced in chapter 2 of this report.

The main goal of the labs was the co-production of policy recommendations. On the one hand, they should inform European policy-makers in general on how to alleviate issues of political trust and polarization from a young perspective. On the other hand, a second set of recommendations should specifically target the educational sector - a sector in which we believe young people have a specific stake and, relatedly, immensely valuable insights. Chapters 3 and 4 of this report give a detailed summary of the recommendations produced in the labs. Chapter 5 summarizes the outcomes of the labs and concludes the main findings. A detailed annex includes all relevant material, and a list of all recommendations produced.

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[1] More information on the CSN can be found via https://acteu.org/civil-society-network/. Appendix 8 entails the introductory flyer of the CSN

2 The Youth Democracy Labs: Structure and quantities

The ActEU Youth Democracy Labs were designed by the ActEU team at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) in cooperation with the Civil Society Network. The researchers produced a first draft structure, which was then commented on and improved by the relevant actors in the Civil Society Network. Afterwards, a test lab was conducted in order to refine the setup and procedures. This process made sure the Lab design took into account interactive and deliberative processes sufficiently well. Here, we as researchers profited immensely from the expertise and experience of our partners.

The entire consortium was provided with a ready-to-use template for implementing the youth labs, including a corresponding presentation, templates for collecting recommendations, and a reporting template. The corresponding documents can be found in the appendix and will also be part of the educational toolkit that teachers and university professors can use free of charge.

In total, 17 Labs across ten countries were organized between June 2024 and June 2025: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Slovenia—along with one international lab. Overall, 338 school and university students participated (N = 338). Table 1 shows the respective statistics for the individual labs. The fact that more labs than initially planned for the project were conducted speaks to the success of the labs and both excessive demand as well as genuine conviction of the ActEU partners.

Figure 1: Summary of all Labs

Lab Nr.	Date	Country	City	Participants
1	19.06.24	Germany	Duisburg	19
2	02.10.24	Germany	Essen	17
3	30.10.24	Germany	Saarbrücken I	34
4	28.11.24	Czechia	Prague	22
5	04.12.24	Slovenia	Ljubljana	17
6	05.12.24	Italy	Trento	18
7	23.01.25	Finland	Turku	24
8	13.03.25	Germany	Saarbrücken II	19
9	20.03.25	France	Lille	12
10	08.04.25	Greece	Thessaloniki	17
11	09.04.25	Belgium	Brussels	18
12	22.04.25	France	Paris	23
13	29.04.25	Czechia	Pilsen	19
14	22.05.25	Austria	Salzburg	20
15	24.05.25	Germany	Saarbrücken III	10
16	27.05.25	Poland	Warsaw	25
17	09.06.25	International	Online	24
Total				338

Source: Figure by the Author

2.1 Structure of the national Youth Democracy Labs

All national labs followed a similar structure and were designed to last approximately 120 minutes. Participants were not mainly conceived of as recipients, but rather as (co-)producers of knowledge, whose lived experiences were seen as essential contributions to the ActEU project's research process and toolkit development. Each lab began with a brief introduction of the ActEU project and its objectives, followed by an explanation of the goals of the labs themselves. The importance of students' recommendations as a core component of the project was stressed.

After a short warm-up phase, during which students responded to questions about their previous engagement with politics, workshop leaders introduced ActEU's core concepts of trust, representation, and participation. In addition, some of the project's initial findings, including data from the focus groups and the ActEU Survey, were presented, followed by a short Q&A session where students were able to ask questions regarding the project. Before moving into group work, students engaged in short one-on-one exchanges to reflect on how these concepts appear in their everyday lives—whether and how they experience trust or mistrust in politics and whether they feel represented.

This was followed by the first group work phase. The participants were split into two groups: one group discussed issues surrounding participation, while the other focused on representation. Each group was asked to create "Chinese portraits" similar to those used in the focus groups of the ActEU project (see for some illustrative examples of drawings from the Labs in Paris and Lille - figure 2). Specifically, the Representation group compared politicians to animals, while the Participation group did the same for political institutions. This exercise was designed to foster a playful yet in-depth discussion—focusing on integrity, reliability, and responsibility in the political context for the Representation group and exploring the motives and backgrounds of youth participation within the Participation group. The phase was also used to activate participants and their (critical) thinking about politics.

Figure 2: Chinese Portraits - Examples from Paris and Lille

Source: Figure created during the Youth Democracy Labs

The first group phase concluded with an open discussion, where participants were encouraged to add personal experiences and other relevant aspects to the portraits. The outcomes were documented on moderation cards or flipchart sheets. Throughout this phase, workshop leaders remained largely passive, intervening only to ask guiding questions if discussions stalled.

Afterwards, students were divided into small groups of 4–5 participants, ensuring a mix from both initial groups. These new groups were presented with the following scenario:

Figure 3: Prompt given to the students

Group Work Session II – Your Recommendations

Imagine…

…you're not sitting in [location] today, but instead, all together in a **modern conference room in the European Parliament in Brussels**. In front of you is a group of European politicians who have invited you for a very specific reason: they want to know how they can **strengthen European democracy** and are asking for your **concrete ideas, suggestions, and recommendations.**

This meeting in Brussels is very important for you – not only because you're eager to hear the politicians' reactions, but also because your professor has given you some important information: Next week, there will be a big workshop at your university. Along with your fellow students, a group of responsible professors from across the region will be attending.

They want to hear from you **what topics should be integrated into the curriculum to better prepare young people like you for life in a democracy.** In Brussels, you'll have the chance to prepare, but this is also an opportunity to get even more specific when it comes to shaping the future at your university.

**Now it's up to you to come up with concrete suggestions & recommendations.
What would you recommend to the decision-makers?**

Source: Figure by the Author

Participants then worked on their recommendations. Workshop leaders emphasized that students should provide concrete, actionable proposals—both for politicians and for the educational system regarding how to address challenges linked to participation, representation, and trust. Again, workshop leaders remained passive as to not intervene in the thinking and deliberative processes in the groups. However, they remained in the room in order to help out in case questions emerged. After this second group phase, the groups presented their recommendations, with workshop leaders asking for clarification if needed. This clarification phase was used to ensure all recommendations were tangible and specific. Common themes across groups were also highlighted for group reflection if time allowed.

It is important to note that while all ActEU partners conducting labs were provided with the template as just described, they were free to divert from the advised structure as long as the labs were used to co-produce policy recommendations. This was done in order to allow workshop leaders to adapt to specific educational circumstances (i.e. age of participants, prior knowledge, interest, etc.).

2.2 Structure of the international Youth Democracy Lab

After the national labs had been conducted, a specific feature was a transnational lab organized online. It brought together 24 young participants from across Europe for an interactive session. Designed as a space for cross-border exchange, the Lab aimed to identify common challenges to democracy and develop actionable recommendations collaboratively that would contribute to the

broader goals of the ActEU project. Unlike the National Democracy Labs, this format emphasised international dialogue, encouraging participants to consider how democratic issues manifest in various national and European contexts. Below a screenshot of the Zoom-Session.

Figure 4: International YDL - Zoom Session
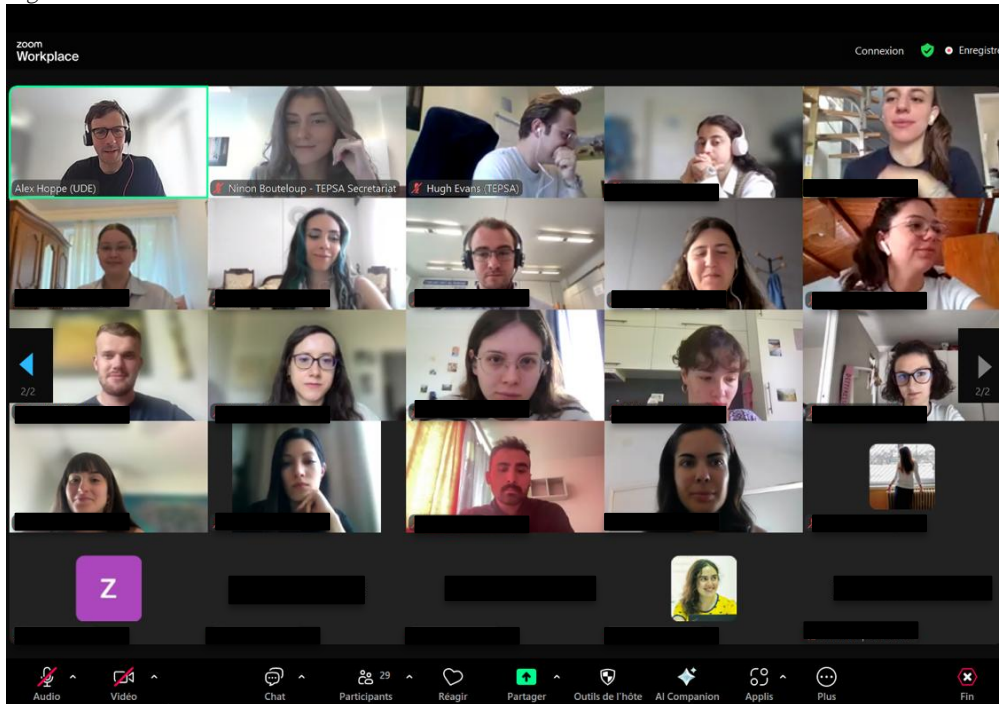
Source: Screenshot from an ActEU Consortium Member (TEPSA)

The session began with an introductory segment led by the moderator, who outlined the lab's objectives and shared key outcomes from previous National Democracy Labs. Participants were reminded that their insights and ideas were a vital part of the ActEU research process and would directly inform the project's recommendations for policymakers and educators.

To warm up and kick-start discussion, participants were invited to respond to an open question about their own experiences with politics. This created a shared foundation for deeper exploration in breakout sessions. Participants were then divided into four thematic groups.

1. Rebuilding Trust in Multi-level Governance – exploring how trust differs across local, national, and European institutions, and how it can be rebuilt where it is lacking.

2. Polarization and Democratic Resilience – examining growing societal divides and how democracies can withstand and respond to polarization.

3. Deceitful Information and the Battle for Truth – discussing the impact of disinformation and misinformation on public debate, trust, and political decision-making.

4. Rethinking Political Representation – questioning whether traditional systems of representation are still effective and exploring alternative forms of democratic voice and inclusion.

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Each breakout group included a colleague from either the University of Duisburg-Essen or the TEPSA Secretariat. They ensured that discussions remained structured and inclusive. While these colleagues were available as moderators if necessary, the conversations were primarily participant-led, which encouraged open dialogue and shared ownership of the process.

Participants were encouraged to use the provided guiding questions for each theme, but they were also given the opportunity to raise their own concerns, share national experiences and challenge each other's perspectives.

Towards the end of the discussions, participants were reminded to formulate clear, actionable recommendations. Each group then selected a spokesperson to present their proposals to the full group. This was followed by a plenary discussion where common themes were highlighted, vague points were clarified and ideas were further refined. The event concluded with a summary, which reiterated the importance of the contributions made by the participants.

While this report is meant to focus on the recommendations developed by the national YDLs for policymakers and the education sector, a summary of the international Lab is provided in the appendix.

3 Summary of the recommendations made by the students

The following section summarizes the recommendations developed during the YDLs. All recommendations have been coded with MaxQDA, with codes and subcodes being developed inductively driven by the data, in order to ensure our reporting stays close to the actual content produced by participants and is not falsified through post hoc interpretation. Accordingly, during the coding process the authors tried to stick as close as possible to the wording in the recommendations while at the same time use some leeway to allow for meaningful categorization. While we are confident to have grasped the actual intention behind the recommendations, incidental misinterpretation cannot be ruled out. Chapter 3.1 presents the policy recommendations and Chapter 3.2 the recommendations for the educational sector. A list with all individual recommendations can be found in the annex.

3.1 Recommendations for policy makers

Overall, participants produced 232 recommendations to policy makers. The recommendations to politicians can be divided into four groups: (1) Communication; (2) Polity structure; (3) the performance of politicians and parties, and (4) specific policy recommendations. Figure 1 shows the chosen (sub-)categories. In the following, all categories will be shortly discussed and the main takeaways presented.

Figure 5: Coding Scheme - Recommendations for policy makers
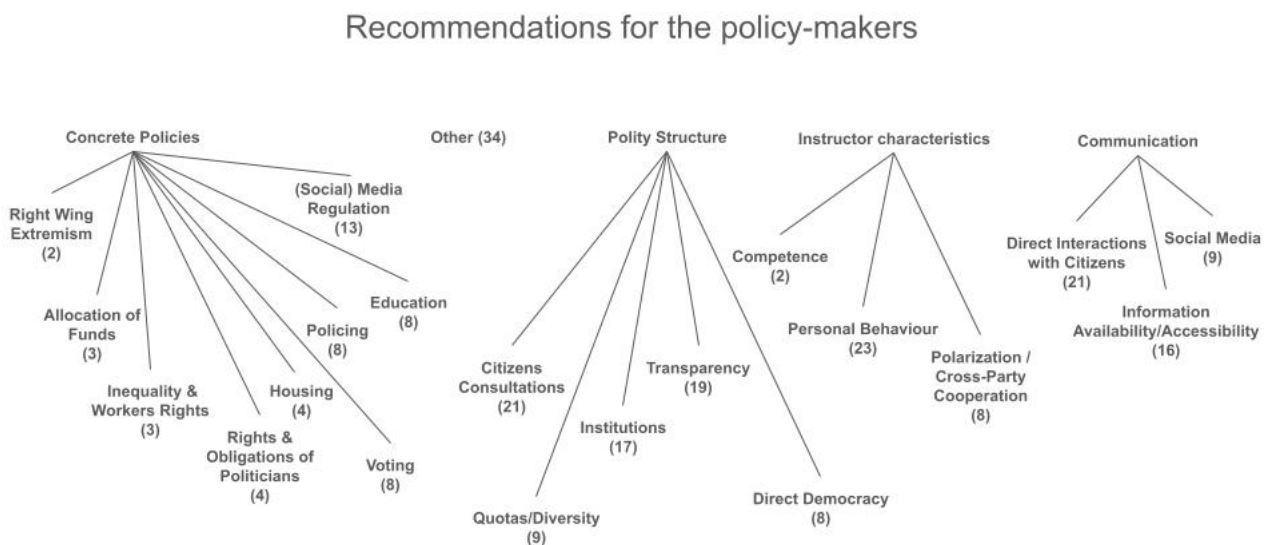
Source: Design by author on basis of MAXQDA coding analysis

Polity structure

A total of 74 recommendations focused on the overall structure of the political system. The majority of these recommendations centred on the objective of empowering citizens and grant them more impact on political decision-making processes. On the one hand, participants proposed forms of citizen consultations with 21 recommendations focusing on this very issue: "Increase consultative democracy at the European level" (YDL Brussels); "Obligatory policy consultations with YFJ (European Youth Forum)" (YDL Ljubljana). On the other hand, participants proposed "[m]ore direct democracy in the EU" (YDL Turku) and to conduct "Referendums in the EU on major issues/decisions" (YDL Turku).

Nineteen recommendations addressed institutional matters. For instance, the group in Trento called for a "right to legislative reforms" for the European Parliament, presumably alluding to the fact that the European Parliament does not possess the authority to initiate legislation. The aforementioned group further posited the implementation of "qualified majority voting in the Council". The same suggestion was also made by the group in Prague. The group in Brussels proposed the direct election of the President of the European Commission, the establishment of transnational lists for EU elections, and public hearings for Commissioners. In contrast, the group Saarbrücken I recommended to generally "strengthen interstate relations" in Europe, which was also echoed by Saabrücken II: "The EU should focus more on the potential of the community in Europe".

Another recurrent recommendation (19), was for politicians, political parties and institutions to enhance their transparency. This encompassed the policy platforms (Prague), parliaments (Saarbrücken I) and the decision-making process in general (YDL Turku). The issue of transparency was identified as being pertinent not only at the EU level, but also at the national level. This was evidenced by Saarbrücken II, which asserted the necessity of transparency at the national level, citing the absence of trust in politicians in Berlin as a salient factor.

Moreover, a demand for greater diversity within the political system was evident, with nine specific recommendations being put forward to this effect. This included demands for equal representation of women, young people, minorities and people with a lower socioeconomic status. The question of how this can be achieved appeared to be more controversial, with the group in Thessaloniki advocating for Quotas and the group in Warsaw demanding to "[a]mplify the voice of minority and disadvantaged groups – without introducing quotas".

Communication

A total of 46 recommendations addressed the issue of communication. Of these, 21 focused on improving the availability and accessibility of information. For example, the Paris group recommended ensuring accessibility in political communication by providing information in "different languages, braille [and] online." This sentiment was echoed in other YDLs, where there was a strong demand for "more easily understandable and accessible information" (YDL Turku). The Trento group advocated for the use of "sponsored platforms for information on the EU," while participants in Saarbrücken emphasized the importance of supporting public service broadcasting online to better inform young citizens. The group in Pilsen further highlighted the need to adapt communication strategies to reflect the needs of different generations and socioeconomic groups.

Another key theme was the call for more direct interaction between politicians and the public, with 16 recommendations dedicated to this issue. The Saarbrücken group urged greater transparency in communication between legislators and citizens. In Paris, participants proposed organizing events and conferences to enhance engagement between Members of the European Parliament

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(MEPs) and their constituencies. Both the Trento and Essen groups stressed the importance of reaching out to young people specifically. Trento called for politicians to be more present and accessible, while Essen emphasized the value of face-to-face dialogue with young voters.

Furthermore, an increased presence on social media was requested in nine recommendations. The participants demanded a "[h]igher presence on current topics in social media" (Duisburg) and a more "[s]erious social media presence" (YDL Essen) in general. This approach was regarded as a means of enhancing the efficacy of communication with young people: "Development of the social media campaigns to appeal to young voters in particular and encourage them to participate in the election" (YDL Saarbrücken I).

Performance of Politicians and Parties

With regard to the overall performance of politicians and political parties, participants made 34 recommendations, 23 of which focused on the general behaviour of politicians. The recommendations included suggestions that politicians should enhance their "connection to reality" and "meet citizens on equal footing" (YDL Essen). Furthermore, it was posited that politicians should "listen to experts", "take a long-term perspective" and "educate themselves more" (YDL Turku). The group in Trento additionally emphasised that politicians should not "switch sides" (YDL Trento).

A total of eight recommendations were made with a particular emphasis on reducing political polarisation and enhancing cross-party collaboration. The participants called for "cooperation between parties" (Essen), emphasising the need for politicians to "reach across the aisle" and "remove the bias when it comes to deciding who you politically align with" (YDL Prague). In a similar vein, the group in Pilsen demanded "fair political campaigning – not throwing dirt on ourselves, but truly representing the public, being mindful of political decency" (Pilsen). In addition, two recommendations were made concerning the matter of competence and expertise. The groups in Ljubljana and Duisburg proposed that politicians should possess a greater degree of expertise in their respective policy domains.

Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations were largely distinctive to the individual countries/labs. Most commonly, these recommendations focused on the issue of (social) media regulation, with the suggestion to "find better ways to counteract disinformation" (YDL Turku), for example, by implementing fines or ending online anonymity (YDL Brussels). Other groups suggested an outright ban of political information on short-video platforms like TikTok (YDL Saarbrücken III). Several groups also advocated for the development of European alternatives to existing social media platforms.

In Ljubljana, the policy recommendations focused primarily on housing. Proposals included rent caps, dedicated housing projects for young people, and the adoption of a unitary housing model. In Brussels, participants highlighted concerns about policing. Their recommendations included extending police training to a minimum of five years, establishing an independent body to oversee police accountability, and banning the use of facial recognition software.

Both the group in Prague and Saarbrücken III demanded fighting socioeconomic inequalities, while the groups in Ljubljana, Essen and Pilsen made suggestions on the allocation and monitoring of funds: "Do not provide funding for projects that favour one ideology or worldview, as this leads to unnecessary radicalisation of the other side" (YDL Pilsen); "Better monitoring/use of EU funds: peer review from other EU countries, more understandable data (short, concise)" (YDL Ljubljana); "More

responsible handling of political power, especially concerning the distribution of funds […]" (YDL Essen).

The groups in Turku and Saarbrücken II were the only ones to address the climate issue. They suggested that politicians should "[…] focus on more important issues than plastic caps and straws, such as demanding lower emissions from companies" (YDL Turku) and to "[…] directly address issues which are important, but often not prioritised, such as climate change or gender equality" (YDL Saarbrücken II). The Warsaw group seemed to be focused on electoral reforms and demanded to "[…] lower the threshold for new parties from 5% to 3%, and introduce preferential voting (ranking of candidates)". The group in Paris underscored the need to simplify voting procedures, advocating for the removal of all voting restrictions for people with disabilities, the implementation of online voting for those unable to vote in person, and legalization of paid leave for workers on election days.

Other Recommendations

There were 18 recommendations which did not fit neatly into the coding scheme and were assigned the code "other". These recommendations encompassed more abstract suggestions, such as the call to "make EU politics closer to people" (Saarbrücken I), and the imperative to "explain why politics is important" (Saarbrücken III).

3.2 Recommendations for the educational sector

This section will summarize the recommendations targeted towards the educational sector produced in the ActEU youth Democracy labs.

In total, 206 recommendations specifically for the educational sector were produced in the labs. Figure 1 shows the chosen (sub-)categories and their numerical values. In the following, all categories will be shortly discussed and the main takeaways presented, ordered by the number of appearances in all labs.

Figure 6: Coding Scheme - Recommendations for the educational sector

Recommendations for the educational sector
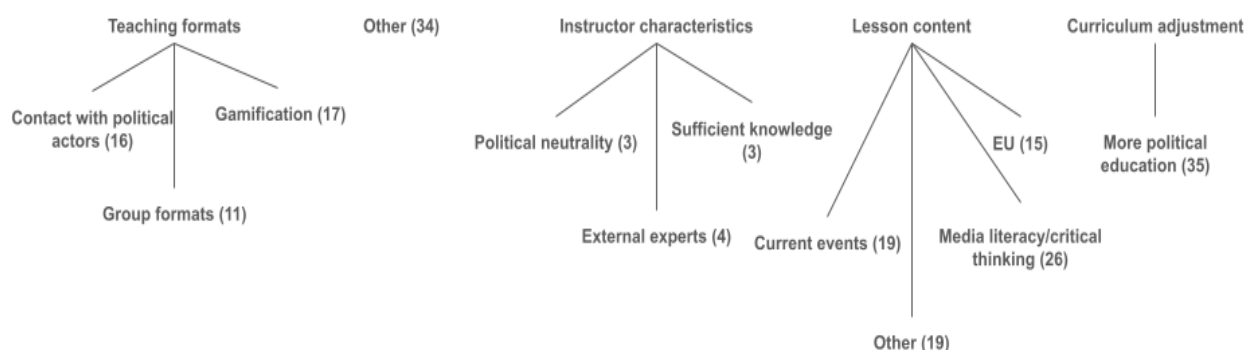
Source: Design by author on basis of MAXQDA coding analysis

Curriculum adjustment: More political education

"Civics courses. PLEASE". This recommendation from a lab in Prague neatly summarizes the single most named aspect throughout all YDLs: A demand to adjust the curriculum, introducing more political education. In total, 35 recommendations focus on this issue. Within those, different foci can be identified. "Citizenship education starting from primary school for all students" (YDL Brussels) has, in slightly different phrasing, been expressed repeatedly across the labs. It includes several aspects important to the participants.

Firstly, participants demand political education early on in the education system. While political education often seems to target students in older age groups, the participants see a value in educating students on the political system from a young age. Many imagine political education to start in middle school or even early (as of roughly the age of 6), which in their view is lacking in the current curricula. This can be regarded as a transnational issue, as it has been expressed by different age groups in different countries.

Secondly, in terms of substance, the concept of citizenship or civic education was on high demand. While the concept in itself is ambiguous and might vary across national contexts, we can safely assume it to involve some sort of preparation for living in a democratic society. Indeed, this has been specified by participants:

"Civic education and how governments work would be a good example for a class in school. Students are learning in young years about the importance of democracy and its values, so they will be more aware of it later in life." (YDL Salzburg)

In terms of issues to be covered in these classes, other participants highlighted (1) basic principles of democracy; (2) transparency; (3) solidarity; (4) justice; (5) basic functioning of government; (6) participation; (7) (individual) rights.

Thirdly, participants stressed that this education should be offered to all students and according to several recommendations should be made mandatory. This recommendation seems to stem from

the fact that politics classes are optional in many school systems and several participants reported they had not followed relevant courses throughout their whole education.

Where it was made explicit (which was not the case very often), the rationale behind this demand was to foster interest in politics, educate students on their rights and opportunities, and the functioning and importance of democracy as a political system so that they can make use of their opportunities by participating in democratic systems.

Content: The impact of the new (social) media environment

The subcodes following in numerical terms can all be subsumed under the parent concept "Lesson content", referring to the content and information which should, in our participants' view, receive more attention. As a category, lesson content subsumes the biggest part of the recommendations, with 83 recommendations in total.

The most important issue for participants is connected to the current media environment, termed (by the authors) 'media literacy and critical thinking', with 27 mentions in total. While these two might not naturally go together, many of the recommendations featured both in combination.

At the most basic level, recommendations concerning this aspect simply demanded students to receive "digital literacy training" (YDL Lille): Education on how to use digital and social media and other sources of information. Partly, this referred specifically to information on the European Union.

However, many of the recommendations in this category went further and included concepts such as fact-checking, misinformation/fake-news/propaganda, AI-generated content, and reliable sources. Hence, it seems many participants had in mind what is neatly summarized in this recommendation: "Implement fact-checking in schools to promote critical thinking and media literacy" (YDL Paris). The uncritical consumption of news, specifically with social media as a source of information, has been seen as a major problem for democracies by many participants. Specifically, the recognition of fake news and misinformation plays a crucial role here. Again, there is a certain room for interpretation when participants refer to concepts such as fake news and even more "critical thinking". Still, given the contextualization in the recommendations themselves and the combination of these concepts with media literacy/social media in most recommendations supports the authors' choice to group these concepts into one main category.

Remarkably, social media, or more broadly speaking 'the internet', is rather seen as a risk than an opportunity in most of the recommendations. Accordingly, participants demand "ongoing education on the dangers of the internet, provided by qualified individuals already working on these topics" (YDL Brussels).

The second most mentioned content category was termed "current events" (23 recommendations in total). It assembles all recommendations which refer to the need of including more recent events and discussing the news in political education. Thereby, participants believe students' interest in politics can be triggered and debates on current issues could develop: "At school, time and space should be provided to watch the news and engage in discussion. This would allow students to discover which topics genuinely interest them" (YDL Saarbrücken III).

Concretely, participants propose a "news week, where students read newspaper articles and learn how to read newspapers" (YDL Turku). A specific focus within this category was on elections. Participants expressed the demand to include upcoming elections into politics classes. They would like

to see students being informed about the parties, functioning of the elections as well as issues being discussed.

The last stand-alone issue worth mentioning is the EU, with 16 recommendations demanding more education on the EU in some form. It is important to note that concerning the background of the ActEU project, this relative prominence of the EU in participants' recommendations might very well be triggered by the initial introduction given by the workshop leaders. Recommendations focusing on the EU are often formulated rather broadly, but still including several concrete topics to be discussed, for example: EU citizenship/responsibilities as EU citizens; European identity; history and workings of the EU ("institutions, structures, procedures"); fundamental rights; other member states' culture and tradition. Generally, a lack of education on the political system of the EU was criticised in several labs.

Beyond these content proposals, several other topics are mentioned sporadically. These might very well be triggered by the respective different foci of the labs conducted and the educational as well as national background of the participants. One aspect that came back in recommendations focusing on different topics was the demand to allow for open debate of these:

"Encourage students to express their opinions and respect other's views (i.e., learning about respectful political discussion—how to debate even when having different opinions/ideologies), which supports political thinking and the understanding that it is okay that people have different opinions" (YDL Turku).

Teaching formats - Gamification, Interaction and Contact

The third main category developed from the recommendations has been labelled 'teaching formats', and it assembles recommendations on the methods of instruction to be used in political education. In total, 43 recommendations have been grouped in this category in three subgroups: Gamifications (16), Contact with political actors (16) and group formats (11).

The first group of recommendations adhere to a trend in political and general education across all levels and age groups, so-called gamification, i.e. teaching through interactive games and other activities. Participants across many labs pleaded for the use of "serious games" in order to teach political realities and processes to students, again across different age groups. Different forms of games have been proposed. Firstly, mock elections as a form of simulation were proposed in the run-up to actual elections, a tool that according to participants is already used regularly in some countries. This could be useful to motivate students to inform themselves about the parties and topics relevant for the upcoming elections and form their own opinions on both, irrelevant of whether they have already reached voting age or not.

Beyond elections, different gaming formats have been proposed by the participants, even though many recommendations merely referred to abstract gamification. Specific set-ups mentioned were simulations of plenary debates (at different levels of the political system) or "MUN [Model United Nations] or similar simulation games of political decision-making bodies" (YDL Thessaloniki). The main rationale for these exercises was, if expressed, to "make people understand why it is important to vote and participate" (YDL Lille) and to "engage students in the study of politics" (YDL Thessaloniki).

Another important focus of the recommendations is direct contact with political actors and/or institutions (16 in total). This contact was mainly envisioned in two directions. On the one hand, students should be granted the opportunity to visit political institutions such as (below others) local, regional, national or supranational parliaments. On the other hand, political actors should visit schools. These include but are not limited to elected representatives; Some recommendations also focus on civil servants, experts or NGOs to make students acquainted with the different facets and actors of political life. Beyond exchange and the ability for students to ask questions to elected politicians, no reasoning was provided for these contact formats.

Lastly, group formats were promoted as a didactic means to instruct students on political issues. These mainly refer to extracurricular activities, such as "civic-themed student clubs in secondary schools" (Warsaw) or "the creation of extracurricular political school groups" (Essen). Several recommendations referred to student councils, which should either be built anew or revived in order to foster student organisation. This should then not only be used as a forum for political discussion and activity, but also as a means to involve students in curriculum adjustment, by "strengthening student association input in schools" (Thessaloniki).

Remaining recommendations

While these were the main categories among the recommendations for the educational sector, there are of course others which were either difficult to categorize, singular or both. One small remaining group of recommendations targeted instructor characteristics (10 in total). Here, participants valued (1) sufficient expertise of the teachers or respectively criticised the lack thereof, relatedly (2) demanded increased presence of external experts (such as researchers) at schools and (3) pointed to the importance of political neutrality of the instructor specifically when salient issues are discussed. Lastly, 33 recommendations have not been assigned any of the above categories and counted as "other".

4 Conclusion

The ActEU project set out to innovate research on participation, representation, polarisation and political trust in European democracies. This includes innovative research practices and the involvement of actors not conventionally included, such as civil society actors and, importantly, young "lay" citizens. The ActEU Youth Democracy Labs were one means of doing so. By designing interactive, deliberative workshops, we allowed for the co-production of policy recommendations to inform the toolbox for remedial action. Overall, the YDLs provided valuable insights into the concerns and needs of young European citizens, as well as their wishes and expectations towards policy makers and the educational sector.

We would like to draw three main conclusions from the experience of the Youth Democracy Labs and the above report. Firstly, there is high demand for more and better political education, including the form of interactive deliberation used in the labs themselves. Across the board, participants' feedback on the labs was highly positive and they were seen as a welcome innovation specifically by high school students. When taking into consideration the recommendations for the educational sector, a clear demand for more and better political education already from a young age is expressed by the participants. At the same time, participants demand the issues relevant for them to be taken aboard structurally in political education. This mainly involves (social) media and current events in general. Additionally, there seems to be an appetite for greater student involvement in course design and conduct. Hence, one conclusion is that participants demand more political education, designed to cater their interests and needs in an integrative process.

Second, not only do our participants want their interest and positions better reflected in the curriculum, they also want a greater say in politics in general. A major focus of the policy recommendations was allowing for more citizen involvement. This pairs well with the demand for more information, which should prepare students for this politically active role in society.

Third, participants demand more direct and indirect contact between politicians and young people. Both, via respective formats in an educational setting, as well as through improved communication and outreach by politicians directly. This can again be interpreted as a demand by participants to be heard and take an active role in the political sphere. All three of these conclusions generally point to one fact: The often-heard assumption that young people in Europe increasingly lose interest in politics can by no means be supported by our experience in the Youth Labs. On the contrary, participants demand an active role both in shaping politics in general as well as their educational environment. They seek more and better political education and are well aware of recent challenges in democratic systems.

In part on the basis of these recommendations, the ActEU project team will develop a toolbox of remedial actions to enhance political trust in and legitimacy of European representative democracies. As researchers, we are supported in the design of the toolbox by the ActEU civil society network. In an initial on-location workshop in Brussels, civil-society representatives and ActEU researchers discussed the purpose and basic design options for the toolbox. Based on these workshops, first ideas were developed by the ActEU project team and then discussed with the civil-society network, to ensure the toolbox actually fits the needs of the target audiences. This toolbox consists of two toolkits, one directed at policymakers, the other one targeting the educational sector broadly, including school, higher education as well as general citizen education. The toolkit for policymakers involves policy briefs developed on the basis of the project's different research findings. In addition, the recommendations collected in the labs targeted at policymakers have been and added to the toolkit. The toolkit additionally contains short and accessible infographics on the main findings of ActEU.

The educational toolkit will include a set of material supporting educational actors in discussing the issues of participation, representation, polarisation and trust in the EU multilevel polity with their students. Again, the recommendations from the labs are included. Secondly, a workshop has been designed allowing for an interactive engagement with the EU, its role in the daily life of participants, its main characteristics and possible future trajectories. A detailed template for implementing the workshop is included in the template, in different languages and with the possibility to adapt to different age groups. Additionally, a collection is included listing educational resources on the EU political system.

Next, infographics on ActEU's main findings as well as educational cartoons are included in the toolkit. These cartoons have been drawn by professional cartoonists and address the issues of trust, participation, polarisation and representation. They allow for interactive and low-threshold engagement with these topics. The cartoons are provided in different languages.

The Labs were met with largely positive feedback from students who were surveyed afterwards and expressed a desire for similar activities and initiatives. The labs will be published as part of the toolkit for the education sector. Teachers and professors can use the toolkit to engage young citizens across Europe, ensuring a lasting impact beyond the duration of the ActEU project.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Template - Procedure of the Youth Democracy Lab

Template – Youth Democracy Labs ActEU

Preface

In order to address one of the key objectives of ActEU - the co-creation of the two toolboxes of remedial action - Youth Democracy Labs will be organised in 13 cities. In these labs, the project team will receive input from young citizens based on their perspectives, suggestions and ideas for strengthening democracy and addressing the main challenges identified by ActEU.

A pilot was planned and organised by the project team at the University of Duisburg-Essen. The following template is based on this practical experience and a subsequent revision for the most effective implementation. This template is only a basic suggestion - the specific implementation depends on the age, size and knowledge background of the group. Moreover, partners are fully free to develop their own workshop designs, as long as the central requirements in terms of output are fulfilled. The pilot was carried out with a group of 19 students, aged between 16 and 18 (please find further information here).

The workshop was conducted with three workshop leaders, which proved to be a suitable size (recommendation: 2-3 workshop leaders).

The workshop was conducted on-site. For partners, both on-side as well as online workshops are possible.

The following link provides a template for a Powerpoint presentation to accompany the Lab: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1GyYC8KANVTKyR-tEw-WPSFcMMgRexcBTfuHLY_dLB5z4/edit?usp=sharing.

The document can be downloaded and then edited.

Didactics & Output

The Youth Democracy Lab is designed as an interactive workshop with young citizens, characterized by activating methods and practice-oriented learning. The participants are an important knowledge resource for the further research process of ActEU and are therefore actively involved in the workshop. They are given space to work in small groups, exchange ideas in plenary sessions and reflect comprehensively on the relevant content.

The labs are conducted with the aim of developing concrete recommendations that inspire the further research and work process of the project. The recommendations relate to two specific areas:

1. Which kind of recommendations should the consortium make to policymakers to counteract the identified deficits and trends?

2. Which kind of teaching materials should be developed to improve political/civic education and increase the state of knowledge of the (young) population on the issues targeted by ActEU?

Necessary material / equipment (in case of on-site workshop)

- Flipchart sheets & markers
- Moderation cards
- Presentation and laptop
- Prepared document for student recommendations (for the toolboxes of remedial actions)
- Signature list
- Camera (for photos during the lab for project reporting, if necessary declarations of understanding)
- One classroom (big enough to seperate class for groupwork I & II)

Procedure for a recommended time frame of two hours/120 minutes (minimum)

a. **Welcome & introduction (5 minutes)**
b. Introduction (workshop leader and ActEU project)
c. Explanation of the Youth Democracy Lab: introducing participants to their role as a knowledge resource

4. **Warm-up / icebreaker (5 minutes)**

The participants are presented with 7 statements and have to report if they agree with the statement / have already done what is mentioned in the statement:

1. *I have voted in a democratic election.*
2. *I have taken part in a demonstration.*
3. *I have signed a petition.*
4. *I have spoken to a politician (on-site/digital).*
5. *I find the opportunities for young people to get involved in politics inviting and well communicated.*
6. *I believe that my vote makes a difference in elections.*
7. *I feel motivated and informed when it comes to political issues in Europe.*

5. **Presentation: First insights in the concepts "Representation", "Participation" and "Trust" (10 minutes)**

In each case, explanation of the concept and a current reference point, presentation of selected descriptive content from the surveys & individual quotes from the focus groups. Group work I is then briefly explained by the workshop leader.

f. **Group work I: Discussion at 2 stations (40 minutes)**

g. **Preparation in pairs:**

Brief exchange on the key question: Based on the concepts presented (representation, participation, trust), where do you place these in your everyday life? Do these concepts occur anywhere? Where do they play a role for you? What are the biggest problems concerning representation, participation and trust?

h. **Group division:**

The group is split in two. One group discusses "Representation", the other "Participation". Each group is accompanied by one/two workshop leaders.

i. **Stimulus: "Chinese Portrait"**

The participants are asked to describe politicians (Group "Representation") and political institutions (Group "Participation") associating them with animals and their characteristics. This start should enable a playful but in-depth discussion of key aspects of integrity, reliability and a sense of responsibility in a political context (Group "Representation"), as well as a discussion about the motives and backgrounds of the young generation to participate (Group "Participation").

ii. **Open discussion:**

The participants will be encouraged to share their opinions on the results, enrich them with personal experiences and add other aspects that are relevant to them. The results are recorded using moderation cards/flipchart sheets. The workshop leader can ask guiding key questions, but is rather passive.

Station "Participation": Questions on barriers to engagement, attractiveness of participation opportunities, self-efficacy, effectiveness of institutions, etc.)

Station "Representation": Questions on integrity, reliability, sense of responsibility, qualities of politicians, etc.)

9. **Break (5 minutes)**

10. **Group work II: Recommendations (25 minutes)**

The participants should collect recommendations in small groups (4-5 people maximum); It is important that the workshop leader(s) explain clearly what is expected form the participants: Concrete, hands-on recommendations for policy-makers as well as educators on how to improve the current situation on the three core concepts and the level of education on these (and related aspects of democratic systems) respectively. We want to use these recommendations specifically when developing the toolboxes for policy-makers and educators. See also the slide in the ppt-template. this will be explained by the workshop leader.

Specific task for the group work:

k. Policy(-makers): What should politicians do to strengthen European democracy?
l. Political education: In your opinion, which topics are important for schools and other educational institutions to prepare young people well for life in a democracy?

Each group records the results in writing (printed sheet); You can use the sheet prepared for this purpose:

Discuss in your group what recommendations you would like to make to politicians and political education. Develop concrete suggestions, use specific examples and put them into text form.

m. **Receipt of the recommendations and discussion (25 minutes)**
n. **Single groups present their results**

> Each group quickly presents their recommendations. In case of unclear/non-concrete recommendations, the workshop leaders can investigate the exact meaning (e.g. through asking for concrete examples)

b. **Group discussion**

> In case there is time left, the recommendations (especially aspects common to all groups) can be discussed in the whole group

(To give the workshop leaders the opportunity to ask questions about the recommendations and make them tangible/useful for the further process, a final discussion follows - the groups present their results and an open discussion takes place.)

n. **Conclusion & farewell (5 minutes)**
o. Reference to further use of the results of the Youth Democracy Lab in the course of the project; in particular the recommendations
p. Thanks to the participants & farewell

Additional options

Additional actors

Feel free to engage additional actors, e.g. civil society representatives, in your labs. They could for example help in collecting the recommendations or have different added value depending on their field of expertise. Also, they could provide you with groups of participants outside the University if wanted.

EU as a multi-level system:

Representation participation and trust work differently and are perceived differently across the different levels of the EU system. In conceptualizing the labs, we noticed that it is very difficult to accommodate several levels in one lab, which is why the labs will often focus on one level mostly. This is not a problem per se. In case you (want to) organize several labs, you could specifically focus on different political levels (local, regional, national, EU) in the different labs.

Appendix 2: Recommendations sheet (provided in A3-Format)

GROUP WORK II - YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS

**POLICY(-MAKERS): What should politicians do
to strengthen European democracy?**

**POLITICAL EDUCATION: In your opinion, which topics are important
for schools to prepare young people for life in a democracy?**

Work assignment:
Discuss in your group what recommendations you would like to make to policy(-makers) and political education.
Develop concrete suggestions, use specific examples and put them into text form.

Your recommendations for policy(-makers):	
Your recommendations for political education:	

<u>ActEU Youth Democracy Labs — Reporting</u>

<u>Preface</u>

Reporting on the Youth Democracy Labs is essential for two reasons:

1. We need the recommendations collected from all Labs to inform our further working process.
2. We need to report to the Commission.

Therefore, we need both substantial and administrative information on all Labs organized by our partners.

We would therefore ask you to fill in the table below with all necessary information.

When reporting the recommendations, please translate them to English but try to stay as close to the initial recommendations as possible to prevent retrospective interpretation.

Also, please report every single recommendation and DO NOT summarize several into one (unless they are exactly the same, then indicate how often the recommendation was mentioned).

Additionally, if applicable, also send us (digital copies of):

1. **A List of signatures of all participants (in case of online labs, a screen shot with all participants)**. This is essential for us to show to the Commission that the Lab has taken place and how many participants took part.
2. Pictures of filled-in recommendations sheets
3. Pictures taken during the event
4. Any other documents you deem useful

Reporting Table

ActEU Youth Democracy Lab Reporting Table	
Partner	
City	
Workshop leaders	
Date	
Number of participants	
On-site/online	
Recommendations for policy-makers	
Recommendations for educational sector	
Any other comments	

Appendix 4: Powerpoint Slides used during the Labs

Youth Democracy Lab

First Impressions

❖ I have voted in a democratic election.

❖ I have taken part in a demonstration.

❖ I have signed a petition.

❖ I have spoken to a politician (on site/digital).

❖ I find the opportunities for young people to get involved in politics inviting and well communicated.

❖ I believe that my vote makes a difference in elections.

❖ I feel motivated and informed when it comes to political issues in Europe.

Insights: What does representation mean?

Representation means, above all, to **standing up for someone** and **making groups visible** in political contexts.

Those represented must be able to **identify with the actions of the representatives**.

"And if I go back to the German EU politicians, then - well, I can only say politicians, because I think the vast majority of them are men over 45. Where you... I don't see myself represented at all."

(A participant from our focus groups - Germany)

Insights: What does participation mean?

Political **participation** describes activity of citizens who voluntarily want to exert influence on public policy.

"If you don't take part in the elections, you can't change anything."

(A participant from our focus groups - Greece)

Political Participation in Germany

Category	Value
Volunteering for a political party	5,23%
Taking part in an unregistered protest	5,80%
Commenting or posting on TikTok about Politics	15,15%
People who say they "always" vote in national elections	69,00%

Insights: What does trust mean?

Trust means being sure
that you can rely on
someone or something.

*"I didn't use to have too much faith in politics,
but now I have none at all."*

(A participant from our focus groups - France)

Level of Trust (0 to 10)

Local Parliament	Regional Parliament	National Parliament	EU Parliament
5,2	4,7	4,5	4,3

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the European Union**

ActEU Activating European
Citizens' Trust in Times of Crises and Polarisation

Youth Democracy Lab

Group 1:
Representation

Standing up for someone and
making groups visible.

Those represented must be able to
identify with the actions of those
representing them.

Group 2:
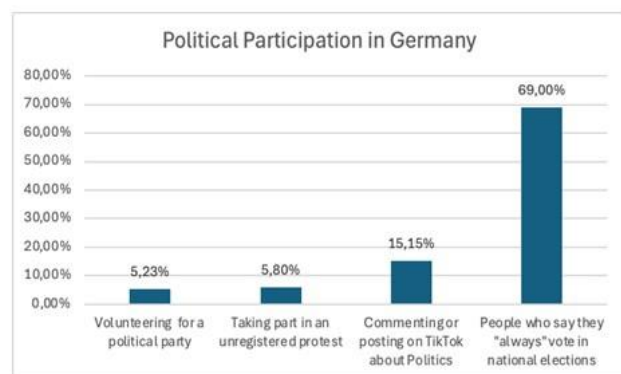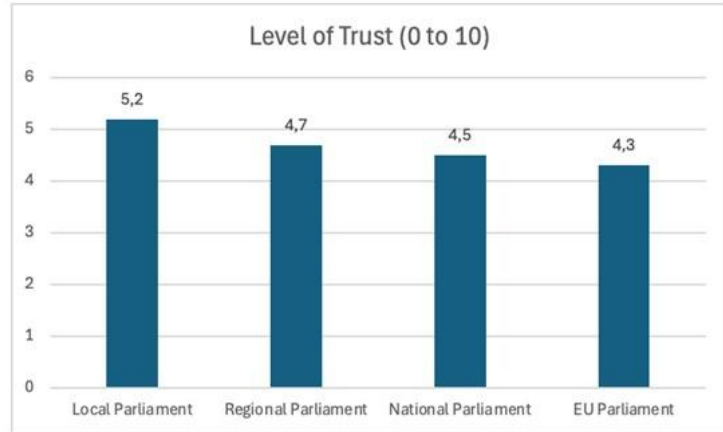### Participation

Political participation describes activity
of citizens who voluntarily want to exert
influence on public policy.

Voting, protests (legal and illegal), party work,
activism, election campaigning, petitions,
(political violence)

Trust

Trust means being able to be sure
that you can rely on someone or
something.

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ActEU Activating European
Citizens' Trust in Times of Crises and Polarisation

Group Work Session II – Your Recommendations

Imagine...

...you're not sitting in [location] today, but instead, all together in a **modern conference room in the European Parliament in Brussels**. In front of you is a group of European politicians who have invited you for a very specific reason: they want to know how they can **strengthen European democracy** and are asking for your
concrete ideas, suggestions, and recommendations.
This meeting in Brussels is very important for you – not only because you're eager to hear the politicians' reactions, but also because your professor has given you some important information: Next week, there will be a big workshop at your university. Along with your fellow students, a group of responsible professors from across the region will be attending.
They want to hear from you **what topics should be integrated into the curriculum to better prepare young people like you for life in a democracy.** In Brussels, you'll have the chance to prepare, but this is also an opportunity to get even more specific when it comes to shaping the future at your university.

Now it's up to you to come up with concrete suggestions & recommendations.
What would you recommend to the decision-makers?

What happens next

❖ Democracy Labs in 13 cities (10 countries)

❖ Gathering your recommendations

❖ Presentation of the recommendations to all ActEU partners

❖ Development of our toolkits for politicians and for civic education

Youth Democracy Lab

Thank you for participating!

ActEU.org

Appendix 5: All Recommendations from every national Lab

Recommendations for Policy-Makers

Essen

Regarding communication:

- Direct conversations with politicians
- Serious social media presence / generally more visibility on social media
- More comprehensive inclusion of citizens in parliamentary votes (see, for example, votes in Brussels)
- Dialogue with young voters (preferably face-to-face)

Regarding the performance of the political office:

- More responsible handling of political power, especially concerning the distribution of funds (perception that much is given to other countries and too little, for example, to children and youth in Germany) and for future generations
- Connection to reality (especially regarding the individual behavior of politicians)
- Meeting citizens on an equal footing
- Accessibility (insight into daily life / showing their human side)
- Politicians should rather spend money for citizens than for themselves
- Cooperation between parties (instead of conflicts between parties)
- Better to make fewer promises or, most importantly, fulfil the promises made

Regarding the structure of the political system:

- Reduction of bureaucracy
- Less populism/lobbyism (for example, referring to the automotive sector)
- More direct voting (e.g., gathering opinions from society as a preliminary view; then decisions made by politicians)

Ljubjana

Regarding the performance of the political office:

- Talk with the community, concrete answers ("cut the bullshit")
- Representatives as experts in the field they are representing (having knowledge, education in that field)

Regarding political processes/procedures/infrastructure:

- Obligatory policy consultations with YFJ (European Youth Forum)
- More local offices and programmes of EU (make it more visible, aproachable; "You need to be seen to be believed")

- Better monitoring/use of EU funds: peer review from other EU countries, more under-standable data (short, concise)
- Consultations with referendums that illustrate the opinion of EU citizens
- Weighted voting & Non-trust vote to be 2/3
- Removing diplomatic immunity for politicians

Regarding the policy field of housing:

- (based on the discussions at the stations and the currently perceived strong (political) challenges)
- Unitary housing model (Vienna as a model)
- Housing project for young people (20-35 years) – building infrastructure for the transitional period from student to adult
- Rent cap (rent should be raised only proportionately with inflation, not all of a sudden)
- Financing and realizing municipal housing, encouraging it

Trento

- Implementing multi-faceted policies in complementary areas (or secondary/complementary areas); avoiding putting a "band aid on a bullet hole"
- Expressing ideas coherently / don't switch sides
- Remain accessible to the common person regardless of political orientation, make policy more accessible and understandable in terms of language levels and being engageable
- Be ready to be held accountable
- Right of legislative reforms to the European Parliament
- Qualified majority voting in the Council
- More initiatives like the Conference on the Future of Europe and on the mobilization it triggers.
- Consistency and coherence between what is communicated and what is done
- Try to reach a much shared agreement – not acting and taking decisions always at the lowest common denominator, settling for the minimum
- Provide sponsored platforms for information on the EU
- Increase Erasmus funding, especially in high schools
- More projects like Act-EU, starting from high schools
- Create opportunities for an EU exchange in the national education systems
- Engage the EU citizens to participate in public surveys regarding EU policies and EU possible decisions
- Invest in local delegations to promote the EU and its values, to spread the sense of EU citizenship at the local level
- More public debates and involvement of common citizens in discussions
- Broadcasting of parliamentary discussions.
- Politicians should make themselves more available to the general public and increase their outreach

Thessaloniki

Most prominently, perhaps, a large number of participants highlighted the need for more direct contact between politicians and citizens. Four participants recommended in-person gatherings of local politicians and civil servants to promote discussion and understanding of citizens' prob-lems. Similarly, other participants suggested using digital tools like social media to keep direct communication lines with politicians. MEPs too, as noted separately by two participants, should be in direct contact with citizens, and visit the country on a monthly basis to discuss with citi-zens in different regions. This would help with keeping MEPs accountable for their promises, as one of those participants mentioned. The issue of accountability was mentioned several times, connected to a demand for monitoring politicians' progress.

One participant lamented politicians utilitarian use of political communication, to note that citizens should not be treated like consumers and be offered political marketing. Similarly, another participant said that politicians need to focus more on political substance. This sentiment was echoed in other recommendations, with one participant suggesting that politicians need to ensure their policy positions are clear and unambiguous. Another participant focused on politicians' language, and recommended that plain, everyday language would help build trust, and lead to higher engagement and inclusion of more people in politics.

In terms of suggestion for institutions, one participant suggested increased transparency of records for discussion and decisions made by politicians to inform citizens. In the digital sphere, another participant recommended that platforms tracking politicians' legislative behavior and other actions, and discourse should become more important, and be utilized to directly contact those politicians. Other participants supported platforms for citizens to directly notify authorities of problems and issues that arise. Obligatory fact checks in parliamentary speeches was brought up by one participant. Other participants suggested that politicians should draw more on surveys to reflect on citizens' preferences and problems. The issue of input on politics was repeated another two times, with one participant recommending the establishment and empowerment of citizen councils to draft and review policy proposals. The issue of more referendums to get direct citizen involvement was also brought up by three people.

One recommendation called for sharper separation of powers in government, while another participant called for tighter regulation on clientelisms practices. Along the same lines, someone suggested the imposition of term limits to avoid the professionalization of politics. Another similar proposal called for quotas for outsiders in Parliament. The issue of quotas was echoed by two other participants to call for quotas for women and minority groups.

Finally, an idea proposed independently by two participants related to the relaxation of party control over individual MPs, to allow them to better represent their voters. Finally, the support of non-partisan media to keep citizens informed was shared by a large number of participants.

Brussels

Training and formation of political elites:

- Lower politicians' salaries

Political participation:

Organise events with the population (Q&A sessions, citizens' juries)

Public services:

- Simplify administrative procedures to better suit individual needs
- Ensure universal accessibility
- Train civil servants in consultation mechanisms
- Train civil servants in inclusivity

(Social) media:

- End anonymity → ID required to register on platforms
- Require platforms to sign a charter with the state to ensure cooperation

(especially judicial)

- Fines in cases of disinformation
- More diversity in key positions or have several people share the same role
- -New measures to ensure greater online safety (especially against child

pornography)

Social movements:

- Minimum 5 years of training to become a police officer (including psychology)
- Less weaponry at protests, better assessment of actual violence
- Establish a truly independent body to judge police officers, real convictions,

no police immunity

- Immediate dismissal in cases of discriminatory remarks → training on racism, etc.
- No facial recognition, drones, body searches; visible police identification numbers
- Community-based policing
- No balaclavas for police officers and weapons used only in exceptional cases
- Financial compensation for victims of police violence

Governance:

- Direct election of the President of the European Commission + common lists across the EU + public hearings for Commissioners
- Ban or limit lobbying and conflicts of interest, correctly apply EU directives
- Increase consultative democracy at the European level
- Adapt or reform the EU's democratic structure to make it more legitimate

Duisburg

Regarding the performance of the political office:

- Addressing all age groups (especially the younger generation) and all groups in society
- More focus on compromises for the population / people-centred and, above all, human politics
- Personal qualification in the respective areas of expertise
- Age balance (not just over-40, as this leads to outdated views)

Regarding communication/campaigning:

- Communication with conviction
- Mandatory C1 language proficiency level for politicians
- Not just setting up campaign street stalls in city centres, but also creating other opportunities.
- Higher presence on current topics in social media (not just extremist parties should be active here)

Turku

- More counteraction against lobbying, especially when larger companies engage in it.
- More transparency in the decision-making process.
- Could focus on more important issues than plastic caps and straws, such as demanding lower emissions from companies. I.e. more focus on the bigger issues.
- Find better ways to counteract disinformation. Money should not equal political power.
- Improve communication, more meetings with EU politicians even after elections (i.e., opportunities for young people to meet EU politicians)
- More direct democracy in the EU:
- Referendums in the EU on major issues/decisions.
- Highlight the EU';s citizens'; initiatives (i.e., make it more known around the EU).
- More easily understandable and accessible information.
- Raise awareness about EU legislation and work – what is the purpose of the EU?
- EU legislation, work, and purpose should be highlighted more, e.g., on social media (i.e., more easily accessible information in channels relevant for young people)
- Make EU programs more visible, like Erasmus is – everyone who studies knows about Erasmus.
- Politicians should listen to experts more.
- Politicians should take a long-term perspective.
- Politicians should educate themselves more.
- Source criticism needed from politicians.

Prague

- free media (EU legislation?), needs to be top-down to prevent overturning
- socio-economic inequalities addressed at national level – changing taxation structure, higher prosecution of corruption, cross-border accountability
- Influence out of politics: More enforcement, greater transparency, restrictions on donations (common pool to fund campaigns?)
- Emphasizing the importance of all elections (state + local)
- Respectful civil discourse shown to public (lead by examples to decrease divisions – reaching across the aisle reminds everyone that the goal is to govern for the benefit of all – helps disillusionment
- Polarization – more common in EU: Reach across the aisle + emphasize, gain back trust from both sides.
- Remove the bias when it comes to deciding who you politically are aligned with.
- Transparency in platform on policies
- Teach about the EU
- Decrease education about substance consisted of endless politics
- Youth outreach – changing image/opinions on politics
- Council of Ministers – switch to qualified majority voting for all areas.

Saarbrücken

- Strengthening/developing the relations between EU countries
- Proportions (of women) to secure representation
- A more open conversation between policy-makers and citizens
- To bring citizens closer to politics through e.g. participation à develop these possibilities of participation
- Explain, why this politics is important
- Respond more to citizen's wishes/generally take more into consideration and to pay attention to those when making decisions
- Reduce bureaucratic hurdles which cause delays in decision-making
- Development of the social media campaigns à to appeal to young voters in particular and encourage them to participate in the election
- More transparent Parliament (offices, policy-makers, parliament, …)
- Strengthen interstate relations
- Concrete approach: to create a wider voice to motivate citizens to express their specific problems and concerns about EU politics in order to be able to work on them à an important role plays the publicity for projects like a public discourse
- Regulate lobbyism
- More transparency
- Developing the transparency of the European institutions and political plans
- "Making the EU concept more tangible through proximity to citizens, especially with regard to the middle and lower classes. From transnational policy to the regional policies of individual governments."
- Finally stop the social inequalities à "poor" citizens must also have their saying in politics

- Rich people must have less impact on politics (finally stop lobby work)
- Make EU politics closer to people
- Expand the possibility of citizen's petitions
- Create closeness to citizens and pay attention to all social classes by addressing people directly and solving core problems
- Education, in particular for the young generation, in relation to social media (Fake News, propaganda) à policy-makers on social media
- Support public service broadcasting online, because it is often the main information source for young people
- More discourse: consulting hours in which you address concrete problems
- Education/more transparency with a view to work, elections, structure, …
- To significantly increase diversity in representation
- To promote participation

Saarbrücken 2

- Transparency of decision-making for the public (2 times)
- No discrimination of marginal groups
- Transparency of private business connections of politicians
- Less egoism
- Address problems and conflicts more precisely
- Be more active on social media à e.g. create a Twitch profile for Q&A's (2 times)
- Show media competencies
- Prove authenticity
- Random surveys on streets where everyone is addressed
- Be better informed and not tell lies
- Talk about current political affairs in a clearer way so that everyone understands it
- Polarization is a big problem: try to find more common points to integrate catch-all-parties like the CDU or SPD back then à create a bigger milieu
- Honesty à stick to election promises
- Workshops especially for young people
- Try to get closer to the people and really talk to them, address their problems à real-world relevance
- Focus on equality more (e.g. gender pay gap) (2 times)
- Fight openly against corruption
- Link EU funds to the rule of law

Saarbrücken 3 (Dudweiler)

- Proportions (of women and younger people) to secure representation and ensure certain subjects to be addressed
- Lowering the voting age to 16 à increases interest in politics at a young age

- Conducting surveys specifically designed for younger people, as surveys often primarily include older respondents
- Lowering the age limit for participation in youth organizations
- Directly address issues which are important, but often not prioritized, such as climate change or gender equality
- Often the precarious social class feels excluded from politics, with a sense of not belonging à try to include and address everyone
- Better address and resolve political grievances from the past
- Fulfil election promises, otherwise trust will decline à create an overview of the accomplished election promises (2 times)
- Motivate the people to talk about politics in various domains in life, such as with family/friends, in TV à younger generations notice that politics plays an important role in life
- Regulate political information on social media or ban it completely, especially the short-video-platforms as TikTok (2 times)
- Resolve communication problems in Europe due to migration
- Transparency at national level: there is no trust in politicians in Berlin
- Political parties should engage more with Europe
- The EU should focus more on the potential of the community in Europe
- Take stronger action against the shift to the right (2 times)
- Try to break up insular family environments which are right-wing extremist
- Create petitions, surveys or public debates for young people
- If platforms as TikTok are not to be banned, they should offer explications and realistic facts instead of Memes, also add links where you can directly access to more serious in-formation
- Political content on TikTok should be more detailed and always show different perspectives (it is possible to combine music and memes with politics to increase accessibility
- Games that provide political education should be promoted in the gaming charts and receive strong advertising, for example through posters
- Ban misinformation on platforms, but also explain why the video etc. is banned (2 times)
- Political parties shouldn't cooperate with influencers

Paris

- Ensure accessibility in political communication: different languages, braille, online.
- Address mobility concerns for people who cannot vote in presence: online voting or anticipated voting.
- Bring MEP's closer to their constituency by organizing events and conferences with citizens.
- Legislate an absence leave for workers on election days.
- Party financing and media should be more representative: implementing 'democracy vouchers' like in Seattle (idea advocated in France by the economist Julia Cagé).
- Strengthen citizens assemblies/ deliberative format and take in their recommendations.
- User-friendly information channels for more transparency.
- Build European alternative to US social media.
- Provide funding and political support for critical citizenship education.
- More (socioeconomic) equality for equal access/protect people from hate spaces.
- Facilitate and assist people with disabilities that need help to vote.

- Make the voting process more accessible.
- Ban any national restrictions on voting rights towards people with disabilities.
- MEP's and national deputies could show what their normal day looks like: showing their workspace, office and activities, etc.
- More participatory democracy with mechanisms to ensure turnout.
- More communications on European news, similar to the YouTube channel like a 'Hugo Decrypte' with his format" 60 news of the day" by the EU.
- Disclose more openly at EU level, discussions with representatives and discussions with other political groups/coalitions for more transparency.
- Organise EU conferences like the Conference of the Future of the EU on smaller sca-les, and more regularly.

Lille

- More transparency about politicians' activities (attendance rate in plenary sessions, meeting with lobbyists: this information should be transparent and available online). This would enable building trust.
- Recruit political science students as interns to hold public consultations.
- More diversity of backgrounds of representatives (socioeconomic levels).
- Town-hall meetings funded by the EU. A sort of Socratic seminar where people can come (of all ages) to hear what the EU is, ask questions, get answers (done on a monthly ba-sis).
- Policy(-makers) should facilitate people's access to policy making, help them understand how things are done.
- Transparency: impose full transparency on discussions, debates between actors.
- More communication between experts and politicians.
- More European media.

Salzburg

- Media education
- More transparency – involving people in the entire process
- Internal mechanisms for accountability (anonymous flag-in systems)
- Labs and focus groups with citizens; make it public and representative as possible
- More awareness on the processes based on a bottom-up approach
- Make an annual report of democratic values for European countries and look at the threats and to democracy and backsliding sources in each country. Because you ha-ve such differences inside the European countries that you can't generalize it. Also having a strong economy and educational system is important, because citizens are not endangered to get victims of populism. Politicians have to rebuild public trust by being transparent, accountable and responsive to citizens' needs.
- EU-wide labs and focus groups with citizens that should be representative in terms of socio-economic background (e.g., gender, ethnic origin, income)
- More transparency, e.g., direct access to policy documents adopted by all EU institutions, bodies and agencies

- Raising awareness on EU projects and their application processes (e.g., CERV pro-jects, ERDF, ESF+, Interreg)
- Fostering involvement of NGOs and gender equality organisations in schools and public events
- Broadening mechanisms that uphold rule of law and democracy and address why people support anti-democratic parties & then establishing forums for citizens to discuss
- Including expert teams or appointing experts in institutions regarding topics like gen-der, intersectionality etc. + funding organizations that discuss vital issues like gender
- Grant more power to the European Parliament to enhance its role in EU decision-making, making the EU more democratic and responsive to citizens
- Citizens should be able to have forums established by the institutions of the EU where they can express their opinions freely which creates debates that improve democracy
- Extend eligibility to vote (Prisoners, Migrants). Listen to voices you don't personally support (get rid of echo chambers), more discussion and free speech in Highschool classrooms, in-crease accountability of politicians.

Warsaw

- Increase transparency in public life, especially in decision-making processes (e.g., recording meetings, lobbying registers, more public consultations).
- Promote citizens' assemblies, including youth citizens' panels.
- Create a digital platform for young people to submit policy proposals and collect public sup-port.
- Establish an online space for meetings between youth, experts, and politicians.
- Reform electoral law: lower the threshold for new parties from 5% to 3%, and intro-duce preferential voting (ranking of candidates).
- Amplify the voice of minority and disadvantaged groups – without introducing quotas.
- Promote awareness of European politics (institutions, mechanisms, activities) among young people.
- Strengthen the role of experts in public life – ensuring transparency (e.g., lobbying regis-ters), independence, and accessibility.
- Increase the importance of strategic documents – they should be participatory in design, resistant to political changes, and more binding.
- Develop independent fact-checking institutions (e.g., the role of DEMAGOG [1]in presiden-tial elections).
- Enhance social dialogue institutions and public consultation tools – to improve political le-gitimacy.
- Mandate participation in debates for all political candidates (a single public TV debate is not enough).
- Work on mechanisms of political accountability – combat tactical voting, introduce a sys-tem to track the fullfilment of election promises.
- Introduce a mandatory voting guide ("Latarnik Wyborczy - election compass" [2]) for all parties as part of the electoral committee registration process.

Plzen

- School reform, education reform - modern, adapt it to today.
- Improve communication of political representation.
- Adhere to the objectives of the political programme: keep informed. Have courage. To take unpopular steps.
- To go more to the people and ask about their problems.
- Encourage more young people to participate in top politics.
- Improve public information about votes and activities (e.g. regularly explaining publicly why a politician voted the way they did in parliament). Ongoing self-reflection.
- Do not provide funding for projects that favour one ideology or worldview, as this leads to unnecessary radicalisation of the other side.
- Communication must be tailored (in form) to different generations and socio-economic groups.
- Ensure gender, socio-economic and generational balance in political representation, while at the same time having professional competence.
- Fair political campaigning - not throwing dirt on ourselves, but truly representing the public, being mindful of political decency.
- Credibility - taking political responsibility, admitting failure before political competition takes advantage of it.
- Promote a healthy society - tolerant, responsible, compassionate.
- Young people must be given the opportunity to actively participate (generational renewal).
- Think big, think ahead and recognise that EU Member States cannot do anything on their own.
- Not forgetting contact with voters, giving them the feeling of being seen and heard.
- To take more account of civic activities (demonstrations, petitions), not to throw them away, but to work with public opinion.
- Reduce the offensive style of behaviour in politics. Reform the rules of procedure of the Chamber of Deputies.

Recommendations for the Educational Sector

Essen

Regarding the general design:

• More political education in all school systems (especially with a focus on current events)

• Curriculum adjustments (as the current curriculum is outdated)

Regarding suitable formats / offerings:

• Creation of extracurricular political school groups

• School trips to the parliament (on all political levels)

• Discussion formats with politicians & other politically active individuals (e.g., also from initiatives or similar)

Regarding the content focus:

• Relevance to current events

• Specific connection to each thematic area (active engagement with the respective topic)

• Inclusion of students'; interests in the thematic design

• Political neutrality of teachers (foundational knowledge should be taught; independent opinion formation happens afterward)

• Before elections: Specific preparation, including voting aids, e.g.,

 the "Wahl-O-Mat"

Ljubljana

Regarding the implementation in general:

- General education on political processes & improving political culture
- Special courses, workshops etc. with experts on European institutions, implementation processes, elections etc. to make democracy tangible
- Implementation at all levels (elementary school level all the way to higher education)
- Mandatory political education / political science subject for high school students

Regarding the content focus:

- Minority classes (gender, LGBTQ+, race, cultural, rights)
- climate change awareness and prevention
- class on current events (globally and nationally)

Trento

- Teaching media literacy and critical thinking
- Introducing political education to lower levels of education
- Allowing students to explore more political theories (in a neutral manner)
- An international perspective should be introduced (focus on other continents, regions, political systems)
- Compulsory education on the EU in schools
- Practical workshops on European elections
- Increase visibility at a local level through leaflets etc.
- Make EU affairs and information a public matter (e.g. speeches timing, law decisions)
- Extension of EU discussions and interest in terms of participation and trust (e.g. ACT-EU) not only at an academic level, but at a more general one, involving workers at companies, universities, public offices..
- Allocate funding for simulations of EU institutions especially among young people (high schools)
- 6/14 years: basic principles of democracy e.g. transparency, solidarity, justice
- 14/19 years: the functioning of EU institutions, fostering of love for democracy and why it is preferable (links back to basic principles), education on how to keep updated, how to inform yourself on social media
- Informal educational campaigns aimed at specific demographics.
- More education on EU (institutions, structures, procedures)
- Sensibilize on the EU impact over domestic policies and hence domestic everyday life
- Make student visits to the EU institutions
- Make EU representative visits to schools around Europe
- Topics: EU citizenship, Freedom of speech, Civil and Political rights, Justice system, EU Charter of Fundamental Rights
- Make better use of social media to educate and publicise EU actions.
- Dedicate some time to teach students the history and working of the EU, starting from elementary schools and focusing particularly in peripheries and rural areas.

Thessaloniki

The prevailing recommendation, made by almost all Youth Democracy lab participants was the strengthening of political and civic education in schools. One of those participants suggested their early introduction into curricula, starting as early as elementary school. A second recommendation stressed the importance of those subjects being taught by teachers with adequate relevant background. Similarly, one participant noted that they often remain relegated to second-tier importance in classrooms currently. Others suggested active participation through essays during semesters. Finally, one participant argued in favor of active participation of students in those subjects, by way of discussion and debate clubs in schools.

Many participants suggested the introduction of European politics lessons in schools, and one of those elaborated that a more in-depth study of European history, compared to national-only history, would equip students with a better understanding of politics.

Two participants independently recommended the organization of MUNs or similar simulation games of political decision-making bodies to engage students in the study of politics. School trips to Brussels was also a recommendation by one participant, while others suggested visits to local-level institutions. One participant suggested it would be a good idea for students to get familiarized with the NGO sector during their school years.

Another recommendation was the necessitation of Erasmus visits for students. One participant suggested the collective participation of schools with students, teachers, and parents in demonstrations for issues relevant to educational policy. Another participant recommended the strengthening of student association input in schools. Finally, informing schools about VAAs (Voting Advice Applications) was recommended by one person as a tool to help young people get to know party platforms better.

Brussels

Training and formation of political elites:

- Open access to studies that allow entry into politics to everyone (no more selective entrance exams)
- Teach people to dissociate political ideas from personalities
- Political participation:
- Popular consultations whose recommendations are actually taken into account
- Educating the public about political parties
- Specific initiatives targeting young people
- Public services:
- Public media service, possibly even collectivisation of media
- Consultations, evaluations, participatory budgeting

(Social) media:

- Training in AI so that it can help detect AI-generated content
- Ongoing education on the dangers of the internet, provided by qualified individuals already working on these issues

Social movements:

- Citizens should be able to hold the police accountable
- Inform the public about common police practices and forms of violence that are not covered in the media; show what the police do and perpetuate through violence in media coverage
- Decisions regarding repression should not depend solely on the mayor decisions should be based on the level of danger, not on the political nature of the movement
- Inform young people about their rights and what the police are not allowed to do

- Governance:
- Implement genuine popular education
- Citizenship education starting from primary school for all students

Duisburg

Regarding the general design:

- Political education as a mandatory subject (not optional) in schools; in addition, it should be taught in every school year
- Addressing current issues in classes (including topics from social media)

Regarding the content focus:

- Before elections: sufficient education on the respective election and political parties
- More school visits from politicians to present their election programs

Politically neutral education, especially from teachers

Turku

- Encourage young people to participate.
- More information on how to get involved—not just facts about politics and political parties, but for example, a high school course in politics that provides skills to participate and think politically.
- Discussion-based teaching about politics.
- The Finnish school student council concept is good.
- Mock elections (mock elections where minors can vote and learn about electoral participation).
- Education on the importance of participation for democracy.
- Practical exercises on finding candidates from a young age (starting from elementary school) by using tools like election compasses, VAAs.
- Practical voting exercises, such as "fake elections", where students create their own parties, position them on the left-right-axis and play politics; run as candidates, and in the end, all students vote for the different parties, with the winning party becoming the "prime minister party." Already in elementary school with modifications (with issues that are relevant for kids, such as school lunch).
- A more active student council.
- "News Week," where students read newspaper articles and learn how to read newspapers, and at the end of the week, create their own newspaper.

Voting from a young age (mock elections or fake elections).

- Political debates in education.
- Practice politics in practice, not just by learning about parties and ideologies.
- Encourage students to express their opinions and respect others'; views (i.e., learning about respectful political discussion—how to debate even when having different opinions/ideologies), which supports political thinking and the understanding that it is okay that people have different opinions. Open dialogue about politics.
- Provide students with the building blocks to form their own ideologies and opinions.

Prague

- Stress direct impact on youth – laws can change, have changed and will change again
- People can and do directly influence election outcomes
- Make it personal – politics will affect your life whether you like it or not
- Local elections – mayor / president of the city etc., referendums
- Civics courses. PLEASE. Comprehensive civics courses that directly tie what you're learning to politics actively happening around you.
- Bring direct examples of speeches, campaigns, legislature being debated at that time to the class.
- Greater media presence for local elections.
- Basic government and civics course in middle school (including parties)
- More in-depth policy course in high school prior to age where you can vote regardless of curriculum or concentration
- Integration of political context more into history + literature courses (demonstrates how it affects daily life)
- Break the bubble that the media creates
- Accessibility in information
- Less jargon in general in political discussions
- Requirement in high schools: 1 or 2 civic classes – need more investment in the younger generations + qualified instructors
- Voter drives
- Timely and easy general information sessions
- Continuous pushes for young people + reminders
- Life skills classes that includes more of an emphasis on our role in a democracy and our rights.
- At AAU for example, the politics courses are targeted more towards IRD students who are assumed to have an interest but for the students who are required to take, many get lost in the course.
- To teach benefits of having open conversations with political opponents/differences
- Critical thinking (digital)
- Emphasizing the need to do your own work.

Saarbrücken

- Making politics more appealing, starting in schools showing that young people's opinions matter and that they are being put into practice, if possible
- Bringing students closer to policy options for participation/providing information education about possibilities
- Educate the pupils about political issues
- More exchanges, visits in foreign countries for pupils
- Pupil surveys arouse interest among young people
- Expand political education in schools à more political education offerings = more interest
- offer especially to young people in schools more opportunities to develop an interest in politics and become engaged
- To pass enthusiasm for political discourse and, above all, critical thinking in schools from an early age
- more information about the system of the EU in schools
- new methods of teaching politics more concrete: what can I do as a young citizen?

Saarbrücken 2

- Create regular workshops for students
- Talk about politics in class
- Address current topics at the beginning of every class
- Talk about party programs to stay informed (3 times)
- Start by discussing the national political affairs

Dudweiler (Saarbrücken 3)

- The school system is too old school, a school reform is required, especially regarding subjects (4 times)
- Political education in lower grades, maybe through interactive activities or game-based approaches (2 times)
- Mock elections
- To learn more about after-school-life/what really is important for everyday life
- Using the Wahl-O-Mat in civics class (2 times)
- Prevent the belief of political misinformation (2 times)
- Often the language is too complex/complicated for every student to understand it (2 times)
- School system is captured in federalism: create a unified school system at the national level
- Take problems and complaints of pupils seriously and try to find solutions immediately or show where support services are available and provide direct access
- Watch or talk about news around the world to keep young people informed
- Often political education is combined with history in a single subject, but most students are not really interested in history and therefore have negative associations with the political classes à make politics a standalone subject, independent of the teachers
- Pupils trust the teachers who should use this advantage to share correct information

- At school, time and space should be provided to watch the news and engage in discussion. This would allow students to discover which topics genuinely interest them
- The class council (Klassenrat), where it still exists, should be used for political discussions to help diversify opinions — for example, once a month (3 times)
- Demonstrations during school hours à excused absences should be accepted for this purpose, teachers should support students in participating (The opportunity to attend demonstrations should be granted regardless of the teacher's political opinion)

Lille

- Digital literacy training: how to access to information (i.e. EU websites).
- Media literacy training: workshops on how to detect fake news.
- Educate people about the EU system through real scenarios: the goal is to make people understand why it is important to vote and participate.
- EU plenary simulations in high schools and universities.
- EU week to discover other EU member states' culture and traditions: enhance representation.
- Train with "eurocars" to exhibit educational content in transnational trains around Europe.
- "Eurocars" to exchange with experts on the EU.
- Similarly to France's courses on 'Education Morale et Civique' (EMC), the EU should push across member states to give classes about civic education/ responsibilities as a European citizen.
- Create a European mission to improve young people's knowledge and understanding of the EU through:
- EU-funded workshops to build and strengthen European identity;
- Should be done in schools (at the local level); Potentially mandatory.
- Stimulate political participation starting at elementary school:
- Organise small elections on different topics within the school;
- Develop associative activities in order to make students more involved at a local scale;
- Establishing councils in schools.

Paris

- Introduce and increase political education in schools on voting systems, national and regional institutions, political parties, etc.
- Introduce voting simulations/school elections to bring awareness to young people and engage them.
- Implement fact-checking in schools to promote critical thinking and media literacy.
- Incentivise civil engagement by organizing volunteering days.
- Q&A with politicians/mayors, yearly in high schools.
- School debates with politicians from actual parties in schools.
- National governments should implement political education (e.g. student-centred approach).
- Agencies: teach media literacy, participation days. Start with secondary schools.
- Knowledge & information sharing for schools.

- Focus on equitable access, priority to underserved communities: budget to make opportunities like exchanges for free.
- Upskilling/training teachers e.g. in media & digital literacy.
- Teach people how to organize themselves to stand up for their interests.
- Incorporate in history classes: civil rights/history of voting, what has changed since obtaining the right to vote (concrete examples). Session on minority achievements and how it reinforced democracy.
- Simulation on democratic processes.
- Visits of electoral institutions/local institutions where students can discuss with the mayor for example.
- Starting at middle school, once a year students go to other member states through a foreign exchange program (meaning the students from abroad also come).
- Starting at middle school, students engage in "serious games" throughout the year, so 6eme on the city hall, 5eme on the regional scale, 4eme on the national scale and 3eme on the European scale (Note: In France the lower the number the higher the level of education. High school ends with year 0(terminal)). High school, use of serious game but on more technical aspects at the national level.
- Generalize learning of EU institutions in all middle/high schools (through gamified methods/simulation games) to learn in a simple way how the legislative process works at all levels.
- Familiarize pupils with reliable source channels/ how to fact-check information + use AI in a proper way.
- Inviting civil servants (specially before elections) to answer questions of pupils about politics/policies + explain programs/debates to pupils aged around 16 years old.

Salzburg

- Invest more in gender-related education (gender-based violence, sexuality, emotional education) and foster involvement of NGOs, gender equality organisations etc. in schools
- Invest more in school and public lectures on how to recognise fake news, fact-checking and AI use
- Critical thinking skills
- Media literacy
- Intellectual cooperation-public schools held in different languages
- Historical education about how democracies crumble, dark history
- Communication skills
- Support individual interests
- Civic education and how governments work would be a good example for a class in school. Students are learning in young years about the importance of democracy and its values, so they will be more aware of it later in life.
- Gender-related education: raising awareness on gender-based violence (its implications, forms of support and prevention), sexuality and emotional education
- Fact-checking and recognition of fake news: providing tools to navigate through newspapers and social media
- AI interactions: sensibilizing students on the risks and benefits of AI tools and promoting a critical AI usage

- Understanding the EU: e.g., fundamental values and principles of the EU and real-life impact of the EU
- Intersectional thinking and gender sensitive approaches to manage a life in a democratic system, where different identities interact with each other
- Media literacy and critical thinking to differentiate between real and fake news and support democratic thinking
- Classes that talk about the importance of voting and voicing your opinion, debating and critically reflecting on other opinions
- Digital literacy, media literacy, inclusion and what it means to be inclusive, increase tolerance and cooperative thinking, readiness to compromise

Warsaw

- Revise the "Civics" school curriculum to reflect current socio-political realities and reinstate it in secondary schools. The curriculum should include knowledge about the political system and political landscape.
- Promote civic-themed student clubs in secondary schools.
- Organize educational trips and study visits to public institutions (e.g., parliament).
- Promote political-themed games (simulation, strategy games).
- Use inclusive language in educational materials.
- Facilitate discussions on contemporary issues, such as the risks of political polarization.
- Develop equality and anti-discrimination education (programs, courses).

Plzen

- Educate on economic, political and historical issues.
- To lead to civic education - to impart up-to-date, relevant information.
- Promote economic education from a young age, because educated people will not fall into the debt trap. Lack of education leads to the election of extremist political parties.
- Promote the development of critical thinking from primary school onwards.
- Focus more on modern history in history classes, rather than discussing prehistory three times.
- Encourage greater literacy in the social sciences.
- Teach the younger generation how to better adapt to modern technology.
- Support student organizations and clubs. More reflection on internet literacy, the role of misinformation, etc.
- Reform the teaching of history - more briefly history up to the 20th century and more focus on modern history, mainly after WWII.
- More on the European Community, European integration and the functioning of member states.

- Encourage critical thinking already in primary school. Emphasise technology education and media literacy.
- Introduce students as early as possible to phenomena such as populism, propaganda and disinformation.
- Encourage critical thinking and the search for relevant information.
- Place more emphasis on modern history, more 20th and 21st century, less Egypt and pre-history.
- Show children their role in society, that a citizen has rights and responsibilities, introduce the constitution, foster patriotism.
- Improve and strengthen teaching in the area of citizenship education - follow the curriculum, introduce the political system, combat misinformation, promote critical thinking.
- While maintaining an emphasis on apoliticality, promote public debate among students - discuss difficult social issues.
- Educate the population on the real powers and functioning of the EU, to challenge the established narratives.

Appendix 6: Summary of the Recommendations made during the international Youth Labs (produced by TEPSA)

Rebuilding trust in multi-level governance

Participants reflected on why public trust varies significantly across local, national, and supranational levels. Many highlighted that trust is often strongest at the local level, where citizens interact more directly and regularly with officials. In contrast, many feel detached from the EU, mainly due to a lack of information, transparency, and understanding of how decisions are made.

For example, regarding the energy transition, the existing convention mandates that EU institutions actively inform citizens about green policies and engage them. However, this kind of public participation varies across Member States. Therefore, participants stressed the need to move from a top-down to a bottom-up approach, allowing people to be involved both passively (through improved transparency) and actively (through citizen engagement) in local initiatives.

There was also strong agreement on the importance of education, especially in promoting democratic practices early on. Schools could function as democracy labs, offering more opportunities for student councils and active participation. Lowering the voting age to 16 or 17 was proposed as one way to connect young people to political processes earlier and help them feel that their voices matter.

Several participants pointed to media literacy and political education as key tools to counter misinformation, especially among older populations. The weaponisation of national identity and the polarisation of media were identified as serious barriers to trust, particularly in contexts where major media outlets are linked to specific political or business interests.

At the institutional level, there was a call for greater transparency and clearer communication from political institutions. Participants urged institutions to explain decisions and processes in more accessible language, as people are more likely to trust institutions they can understand.

Finally, it was noted that in some countries, basic democratic conditions, such as fair elections, must first be ensured. Without this foundational trust, even well-designed participatory or educational initiatives may not be enough.

Polarisation and democracy resilience

How do growing cleavages in society - on issues like migration, climate and gender -affect our ability to listen, deliberate and coexist? Are polarised societies less democratic, and can democracy thrive in a context of polarisation? Are today's institutions doing enough to hold space for difficult conversations, or are they part of the problem? These were some of the guiding questions of this group discussion.

One of the key ideas put forth was that democratic resilience both feeds and is fed by polarisation. With that in mind, participants suggested introducing mechanisms to allow for greater scrutiny of central institutions as a way to build trust. The reasoning was that citizens often distrust both central institutions and the existing accountability mechanisms meant to oversee them. While partly a matter of the rule of law, it is also a question of public perception and trust: where democratic resilience is low, polarisation tends to thrive. Strengthening resilience could therefore help reduce polarisation by reinforcing institutional trust.

The discussion also touched on the role of education. One proposal was to introduce ad hoc courses in high schools to increase students' understanding of how the EU operates, particularly how its accountability mechanisms function. Once people are aware such mechanisms exist, they may be less likely to remain trapped in bubbles or echo chambers.

Participants agreed that this should go beyond basic civic education to include media literacy and training in how to distinguish between political narratives, and crucially, how some of these narratives are instrumentalised to promote polarisation. It was pointed out that the issue is not confined to the far right; political misinformation is broader and often more subtle, making the ability to detect manipulation all the more essential. Free speech is vital, but so is equipping people with the tools to know when they are being misled.

Fact-checking was also discussed as a possible solution, though it was noted that fact-checkers often act after the damage is done. Therefore, while valuable, fact-checking is ultimately a reactive tool. What is truly needed, several argued, are more proactive approaches, especially in the field of education.

Rethinking political representation

Participants discussed how traditional forms of representation often fail to include minority and marginalised groups. Many people feel that politics is happening "without them" because they lack access, understanding, or real influence. The group explored where people turn when traditional politics feels out of touch and what it means to have, or not have, a voice in today's Europe.
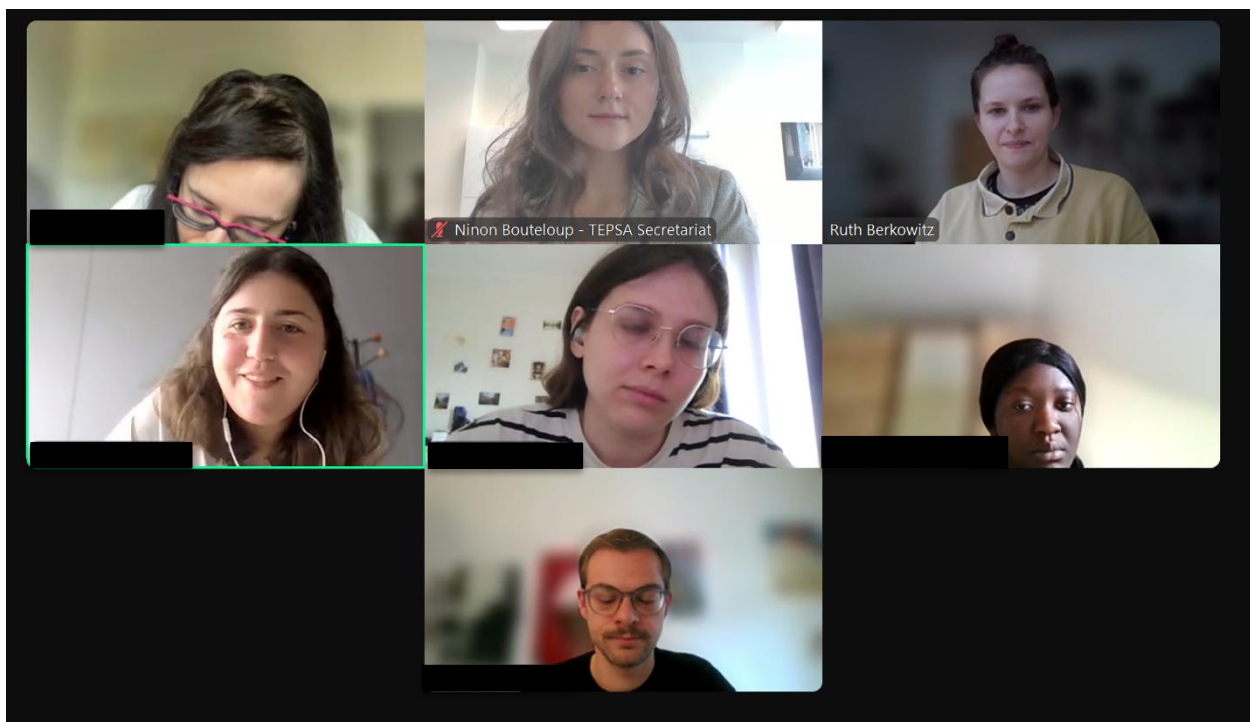
Breakout group on Rethinking political representation (Trans-National Youth Democracy Lab)

During deliberations, participants highlighted the need to strengthen political participation, particularly among minority and underrepresented groups, as a pathway toward more inclusive representation. A key recommendation was to establish training centres or civic education spaces that inform people about their rights, how democratic institutions work, and how to become active

members of their communities. This could take the form of university-based conferences, civic incubators, or other public outreach formats. The starting point, it was agreed, is often a lack of information and awareness.

One recurring point was that access to information alone does not guarantee participation, especially for groups like long-term migrants who often lack formal avenues for engagement. Participants pointed to examples from other countries where migrants can vote in local elections, suggesting these as potential models for inclusive reform. Local-level engagement was seen as particularly important, as this is where people often feel closest to political decisions. There was strong support for local democratic tools, such as citizens' panels and participatory budgeting, which give people a direct role in shaping decisions that affect their communities. In situations where people lack full citizenship status yet are significantly affected by political decisions, these mechanisms were seen as especially effective.

Appendix 7: Civil Society Network Flyer

#ActEU
Civil Society Network

Empowering change with the ActEU Civil Society Network

At the heart of the ActEU project lies the Civil Society Network (CSN) – a vibrant and dedicated community passionate about shaping the future of Europe. With a focus on pivotal policy areas such as multi-level governance, citizens' and youth participation, gender equality, and migration, the network is uniquely positioned to make a significant impact. As a key advisory body to the ActEU scientific team, the CSN provides invaluable insights, expertise, and fresh perspectives that drive the project forward.

Charting the course of innovation

The CSN is at the heart of our quest to understand and counter the decline in political trust and legitimacy. Through collaboration and expertise, it is pivotal in reaching significant milestones that encapsulate our journey towards meaningful change.

1. *At the foundation of transformative action is robust methodology. The CSN plays a crucial role in refining our approaches, ensuring that our research and initiatives are grounded in inclusivity and effectiveness.*

2. *Collaboration is key to innovation. The CSN engages in the co-creation of comprehensive toolkits dealing with issues of declining political trust in representative democracies and counteracts any further decline. This reflects a tangible manifestation of our collective will to provide practical solutions that stakeholders across Europe can implement.*

3. *Knowledge is most powerful when shared. The CSN actively participates in the dissemination of our research findings, ensuring that the insights and solutions we uncover reach the widest possible audience. This is about amplifying our impact, engaging with the community, and fostering a dialogue that drives societal progress.*

MILESTONE 1
Grounded research and methodological advice

MILESTONE 2
Co-development of the toolkit for remedial actions

MILESTONE 3
Dissemination of research results to all stakeholders

ActEU

ActEU Activating European
Citizens' Trust in Times of Crises and Polarisation

Meeting the ActEU Civil Society Network

Gender Equality

Réka Sáfrány
Hungarian
Women's Lobby

Fiona McKay
Gender At
Work

Ivonne Pokropek
International
Alliance of Women

Citizens' participation

Daniela Vancic
Democracy
International

Assya Kavrakova
European Citizen
Action Service

Paul Zoubkov
Democracy Reporting
International

Climate

Pegah Maysa Moulana
Youth and Environment
Europe

Charlotte Billingham
European Climate Foundation

Andreas Beckmann
WWF CEE

Youth

Wim Gabriels
Erasmus
Student Network

Antonio Argenziano
Young European
Federalists

María Sierra
European Student's
Union

Dylan Ahern
De Kiesmannen

Multi-level governance

Adrien Licha
ALDA

Adam Nyman
Debating Europe

Zora Siebert
Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung
European Unio

Ophélie Masson
European Alternatives

Migration

Eva Valentová
Association for Integration
and Migration

Mirna Buić
PiNA

Rasmus Alenius Boserup
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"The ActEU CSN offers an unparalleled opportunity to directly and collectively influence the course of European policy and innovation. We're not just discussing change; we're actively shaping the future of the EU."

Michael Kaeding & Daniela Braun
ActEU Project Leads

ActEU Activating European
Citizens´ Trust in Times of Crises and Polarisation

About ActEU

How can we conceptualize and empirically measure political trust and legitimacy beyond the usual survey question "How much trust do you have in the parliament?"? Does the multi-level nature of European representative democracies require an identical level of citizen support at the regional, national and EU levels? How does social polarization on key policy issues of our times –immigration, climate change, and gender inequality– challenge the political trust in, and legitimacy of, democratic political systems? And what can policymakers and civil society do to master these challenges? ActEU aims at finding answers to these questions pursuing two overarching goals: In phase 1, we map and investigate persistent problems of declining trust, legitimacy and representation in Europe with a particular attention to the polarization of societies and the EU's multi-level structures. Providing an innovative conceptual framework on political attitudes, behavior and representation across Europe, we establish an original empirical infrastructure based on an innovative combination of methods and newly collected quantitative and qualitative empirical data (focus groups, experimental surveys, web scraping). In phase 2, these results will flow directly into the creation of a toolbox of remedial actions to enhance political trust in and legitimacy of European representative democracies. In cooperation with a newly created Civil Society Network, Youth Democracy Labs across 13 European cities and in exchange with political cartoonists "Cartooning for democracy", we will develop context-sensitive solutions for all polity levels and some of the most polarizing policy areas, and craft tailor-made toolkits for both policymakers and civil society and the educational sector. Finally, we deploy a differentiated dissemination strategy to maximize ActEU's scientific, policy and societal impact in activating European citizens' trust and working towards a new era of representative democracy.

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