

Position Paper

Young people's vision for the New Democratic Pact for Europe

Introduction

The New Democratic Pact for Europe is the Council of Europe's response to democratic backsliding, disinformation, impunity, and authoritarianism. The premise of this bold new initiative is "not to reinvent democracy, but to reinforce its foundations, amplify its benefits, and innovate its form to make it tangible for everyone, especially younger generations".¹

The European Youth Forum - as the largest platform of youth organisations in Europe and a long-standing partner of the Council of Europe - welcomes the initiative to make Europe's democracies durable and resilient. The European Youth Forum offers policy recommendations which can help to reverse the trend of democratic backsliding, address the needs of young people across Europe and use the reform momentum to bolster young people's trust in democratic institutions.

Contrary to common assumptions, young people are not turning away from democracy. However, trust in democratic institutions is undermined when democracies fail to deliver security, fairness and opportunity.

What the New Democratic Pact needs to address

1. Democracies able to respond to the challenges of present and future

In an era of global insecurity - in economic, military and environmental terms - can our democracies continue to deliver a good quality of life for citizens in Europe? Young people, who continue to be overlooked as stakeholders in our political systems, often bear the brunt of this insecurity. From the financial crisis and austerity through to the Covid-19 pandemic, democracy's promise of prosperity and peace has felt distant to many young people today, who cannot access decent housing, quality employment, affordable training or appropriate healthcare.

Over the last decade, the Youth Progress Index² (YPI) has recorded some of the sharpest declines throughout CoE member states in precisely these areas. Some of the aspects analysed in the Index include access to affordable housing (-11.43 points), equal access to quality healthcare (-7.36) and equal access to quality education (-6.49), alongside significant deteriorations in academic freedom (-10.65) and a dramatic reduction in political rights, especially freedom of peaceful assembly (-6.15).

Therefore, the New Democratic Pact should include measures to:

- Understand the needs of young people, in order to inform appropriate and targeted policies, through:
 - establishing meaningful participation processes with young people and youth organisations;

1. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/new-democratic-pact-for-europe>

2. <https://youthprogressindex.org>. The Youth Progress Index measures indicators on a scale 0-100.

- gathering high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by age, income, gender, race, ethnicity;
- Reinforce and carry forward the commitment to meaningfully implement a youth perspective in the Council of Europe's work, as adopted by the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth.
- Offer effective policy solutions to issues that affect future generations, especially in the fields of environmental protection and the future of work.
- Strengthen and create new instruments, such as a boosted European Social Charter and legally encoding the Right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

2. More inclusive democracies, reflecting the needs of all members of society

Representative democracy is a good model, when elections are free and fair and governance is transparent. However, governance can feel distant to many young people. More efforts need to be made to ensure that all young people feel that democracy is for them, notably by including more individuals from vulnerable backgrounds.

Young people expect democracies to be strong enough to address polarisation and security concerns while remaining firmly anchored in human rights, due process and the principle of non-discrimination. Policies and public discourse should reinforce the views shared by young people and be truly representatives of their needs. They are disproportionately affected by the triple planetary crisis, yet their perspectives are still insufficiently reflected in the design of new policies. This is proven also by the Youth Progress Index in the declining equality of rights protection across social groups (-5.39), underscoring an urgent need for action.

Therefore, the New Democratic Pact should urge Member States to:

- Ensure free and fair elections, without undue interference or unnecessary barriers to youth participation.
- Lower the voting age to 16 in all elections and reduce age limits for the right to stand as a candidate.
- Instate active measures to increase the access to voting for young people, in partnership with youth organisations, such as e-voting and postal voting.
- Empower more young people, young women and youth from minority backgrounds to run for political positions; support and fund initiatives to get more diverse candidates elected; facilitate the establishment of youth wings within political parties.
- Ensure good governance standards are met across all policy areas, in line with the CoE's 12 Principles of Good Democratic Governance and other established benchmarks on transparency, accountability, rule of law, anti-corruption, and participatory decision-making, as defined in Council of Europe instruments and other internationally recognised frameworks.

3. A vibrant civic space where civil society organisations are valued

Civic spaces in Europe are shrinking. The Youth Progress Index registers that in the last decade, on average, the right to peaceful assembly has declined by more than 6 points in Council of Europe member states, with a drastic decline in 21 countries. Student demonstrations for democracy in several countries, such as Belarus, Hungary, Serbia and Turkey, have been met with disproportionate state crackdowns.

Instead of vilifying, ostracising and shutting down civil society and youth-led movements, they should be seen as the cornerstone of a functioning democracy and proactively included in public debate and policy making.

Therefore the New Democratic Pact must reinforce the Council of Europe's ability to:

- Ensure the freedom of association is protected in all Member States, removing unnecessary barriers to establishing civil society groups, especially in relation to NGO registration, reporting, banking and activities, and prevent legislation such as 'foreign agent' laws from restricting this right.
- Safeguard freedom of assembly, allowing peaceful gatherings, demonstrations, and other public manifestations, protecting young people from disproportionate violence and politically-motivated detention.
- Stop undue intimidation of civil society organisations, police raids, overburdensome public reporting and intransparent granting schemes.
- Avoid the misuse of restrictions to the freedom of assembly and association based on arbitrary interpretations of 'national security' or 'national interest' by Member States.
- Monitor and conduct research on governmental and institutional actions which shrink or limit civic space.
- Commit resources to encouraging citizens, especially young people, to self-organise and contribute to public debate on issues they care about, in a non-discriminatory manner in line with the human rights framework.
- Promote policies, public narratives and educational initiatives that counter hatred and fear, and support civil society organisations that foster inclusion, including initiatives building on the legacy of the Council of Europe's No Hate Speech Movement.

4. Quality information spaces

The way in which we receive information has been revolutionised over the past decades. The YPI demonstrates that in the last decade we witnessed an incredible surge in internet users (+17.5) and the use by governments of digital technologies to enhance e-governance and public engagement (18.7). At the same time, digital spaces are less free than ten years ago, as freedom of press declined by 7 points in the CoE space alone. Access to quality information, resulting in well-informed citizens (and politicians) forms a key element of how a representative democracy works.

So many of us - and especially young people - get our news and analysis from social media platforms. For too long, these platforms have gone unregulated as ostensibly free information spaces, but in reality have become hotbeds of algorithmic manipulation, disinformation, misinformation and polarisation. We need to reinvest in quality information spaces and regulate divisive social media platforms.

Therefore, the New Democratic Pact should reinforce processes and mechanisms which:

- Guarantee free, easy and inclusive access to information, and transparent governance in institutions and public authorities, to increase understanding and trust.
- Invest in independent journalism and free media, and measures to ensure the safety of young journalists.
- Regulate online spaces, which have become a key arena of public debate, while upholding the core of human rights, as codified in the ECHR.
- Push back against media capture by authoritarian governments, notably by continuing support for the CoE Media Freedom Platform.
- Invest in information campaigns for citizens in relevant topics, relying on the expertise of specialist information providers such as youth organisations when addressing young

people, citizens' advice bureaus, and the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA);

- Include civic education as an obligatory part of formal education curricula, and ensure adequate support and recognition for youth organisations who provide civic education to young people through non-formal education
- Strengthen the CoE's own work on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education

5. Respect for international rules-based order and multilateral cooperation

As democracy starts to be questioned by the public and by political actors within Europe, so do some of the underlying tenets of democracy, including human rights protections, multilateralism and a rules-based international order. Yet these conventions have been key in ensuring rights for young people, especially marginalised young people, rural youth, Roma youth and young people on the move.

The notion of 'sovereignty' is being used as a buzzword to justify unravelling hard-won international standards, which, in the long-run, are likely to leave young people with fewer rights and opportunities.

Therefore, the New Democratic Pact should empower the Council of Europe to:

- Seek recommitment from Member States to the European Convention on Human Rights and the Court system, at legal and political level, and push back against initiatives which aim to limit the application of human rights on a discriminate basis.
- Establish a monitoring procedure to ensure respect for the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy, in complementarity with the newly-established parameters.

- Provide more tailored support for Member States to adhere to the values of the ECHR across policy areas (e.g. through policy support measures, cooperation projects, training, HELP programmes, etc.).
- Collaborate more closely with the European Union on matters relating to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, especially the Democracy Shield initiative and prioritise the accession of the EU to the ECHR.

6. Strengthening the role of youth organisations as key actors in democracies

Young people are not only passive spectators in our democracies. By choosing to self-organise around topics they care about - from sport, music and nature to intercultural exchange, and politics - young people and youth organisations create spaces for democracy. These spaces are often the first place where young people vote, co-decide on a project, meet new people from different backgrounds and look for common ground on divisive societal issues.

In short, by strengthening local youth organisations, youth councils and youth participation mechanisms, young people are given a taste of democracy that will accompany them for years to come.

Therefore, the New Democratic Pact must urge the Council of Europe and the Member States to:

- Recognise the indispensable role of self-organised, independent, voluntary, youth-led organisations and groups as key actors in democracy.
- Provide funding and support to strengthen youth organisations from local to European level, including through the European Youth Foundation.
- Embrace input provided by youth organisations as an important indicator of issues close to citizens' hearts, even when expressed in a critical way.

- Acknowledge that youth organisations and youth workers are the best vehicles for reaching out to young people at grassroot level, and actively partner with youth organisations on public information campaigns, such as voter registration and voter turnout campaigns.
- Fully implement the Final Declaration of the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth³, including support for youth centres and youth work, together with the Advisory Council on Youth.

Conclusion

The New Democratic Pact is an opportunity for the Council of Europe to work together with young people - and for young people - to secure democracy in Europe.

Young people today are growing up in turbulent, insecure and self-doubting democracies, which are not always delivering the promised quality of life. The New Democratic Pact is an opportunity to show that democracies are capable of addressing the challenges of our time, recommitting to international human rights standards, holding governments to account for non-compliance and showing trust in self-organised youth movements who teach young people about democracy in their languages and in their communities.

Alongside the Advisory Council on Youth, the European Youth Forum looks forward to elaborating on these recommendations throughout 2026, in particular during the New Democratic Pact Youth Event this summer.

3. <https://rm.coe.int/final-declaration-ministerial-2765-4580-6097-1/488028cf71>



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