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**Bringing the European Union Closer to its Young Citizens:  
Youth Active Citizenship in Europe and Trust in EU Institutions**  
Editorial for the Special Issue

GUEST EDITORS

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### **Abstract**

European Union countries are participatory and representative democracies. Therefore, active citizenship in the EU and trust in EU institutions are paramount for the continuation and the strengthening of the EU project. Young Europeans who hold the future in their hands need to be actively engaged not only in the social and political life within their national communities, but also in the wider European community. The papers in this special issue examine whether and how European youth identify with the EU, trust EU institutions and engage in EU issues, and which societal and proximal-level contexts and/or individual-level attributes promote or hinder young people's active citizenship in European context. They are based on results from the Horizon 2020 CATCH-EyoU project, standing for Constructing AcTive CitizensHip with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solutions. Scientists from different disciplines (Psychology, Political Science, Sociology, Media and Communications, Education) and from eight European countries (Sweden, Estonia, UK, Germany, Czech Republic, Greece, Portugal, Italy). Together, the papers contribute to the development of a new, cutting-edge conceptualization of youth active citizenship in the EU, and to a better understanding of the factors promoting or inhibiting young EU citizens' engagement, participation and active citizenship at the European level.

### **Bringing the European Union Closer to its Young Citizens: Youth Active Citizenship in Europe and Trust in EU Institutions**

These past years the international community experienced one of the deepest economic recessions since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Many countries in the world were, and some still are, struck by this latest economic recession. However, significant diversity was observed in the degree to which the recession affected different countries. In Europe, even though most countries were affected, southern European countries (Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Portugal, Spain), as well as Croatia and Ireland, were among the worst hit (UNICEF, 2014). Austerity measures adopted by governments in these countries have changed drastically their citizens' life patterns and have worsened their future outlook.

As the economic crisis and its effects on people deepened, new questions about markets, governance and democracy were voiced ever more loudly. Political trust in the EU project started to erode. In many European countries, populist extremist right wing parties have gathered increasing strength (Langenbacher & Schellenberg, 2011), and a key item in their political agendas is the contestation of the European Union and the EU project. At the same time, however, other European countries are asking to join the EU, often strengthening concerns and triggering heated debates regarding free mobility and migration of EU citizens within the EU.

Young people are among the most severely affected by this economic crisis. Youth unemployment, particularly in Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal, has been rampant during the crisis (UNICEF, 2014). This has led to a "lost generation" of young people, who have left their home country to look for work in other countries. The demand by northern European countries for skilled labor exerted a strong attraction to the unemployed youth of Europe's southern nations, who are often highly educated and specialized.

In this context, Eurobarometer data (2013) revealed that young people's trust towards the EU, as well as national political institutions, is declining; a finding that held more strongly for southern European youth. However, other, seemingly contradictory, evidence shows that young EU

citizens, 15 to 24 years of age, hold positive attitudes towards the European Union and European Integration. In this direction, some youth believe that, in addition to their national identity, their identity as Europeans will be part of their self-identification in the future (Jacques, 2016).

Studies offer a mixed and complex picture regarding the degree and patterns of young Europeans' civic and political engagement. A number of studies show that they tend to be more active in non-governmental and local associations than in political parties (Barrett & Zani, 2015). Some young people use alternative ways to make their voices heard, often mixing traditional with new forms of participation. The latter are often based on the use of social media (e.g., Coleman & Rowe, 2005). Alarming, others seem to take a passive stance towards politics (Amna & Ekman, 2013). Youth that seem disenfranchised from the political system or the EU may turn to authoritarian or far right parties, others may instead engage in politics with unconventional actions, such as expressing civil disobedience in ways that are considered illegal, and still others may completely disengage and appear passive.

However, since European Union countries are participatory and representative democracies, active citizenship in the EU and trust in EU institutions are paramount for the continuation and the strengthening of the EU project. Young Europeans, who are the first generation of native EU citizens and hold the future in their hands, need to be actively engaged not only in the social and political life within their national communities, but also in the wider European community. How can European and national public authorities motivate young Europeans to move away from a political apathy and to actively engage in the democratic process at all levels of governance?

The EU, in order to bridge the gap between young Europeans and EU institutions, needs to carefully hear their voices and to incorporate their concerns and visions into decision making. To achieve this goal, the ways young Europeans engage (or not) in the social and political life both at the national and European levels as well as the factors and processes that account for differences in patterns of civic and political engagement need first to be identified. How do young Europeans understand and practice citizenship? How do they conceive the EU and themselves as active EU

citizens? Whether and how do they develop and express their sense of belonging to the EU and their European identity?

The papers in this special issue are based on results from the Horizon 2020 CATCH-EyoU project, standing for Constructing AcTive CitizensHIp with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solutions. Scientists from different disciplines (Psychology, Political Science, Sociology, Media and Communications, Education) and from eight European countries (Sweden, Estonia, UK, Germany, Czech Republic, Greece, Portugal, Italy), examine, each from their perspective, whether and how European youth identify with the EU, trust EU institutions and engage in EU issues, and which societal and proximal-level contexts and/or individual-level attributes promote or hinder young people's active citizenship in European context. Two age groups are included, namely 15-18 and 20-26-year-olds. The project is multimethod using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection from youth, as well as analysis of public policy documents, media and school textbooks. This special issue draws from data collected during the first two years of the project to investigate the factors that, at different levels of context and analysis (from the individual psychological to the societal levels) predict the different ways in which young Europeans (adolescents and young adults from different countries) engage (or do not engage) with social and political issues and become active European citizens..

A heuristic model of EU active citizenship has informed the overall CATCH-EyoU project. This model includes, as dimensions of the construct, psychological citizenship (e.g., identification with the EU, positive attitudes and trust towards the EU) and participatory practices, and as key factors influencing young people's construction of EU active citizenship (investigated throughout the overall project and its work packages), the policy context, the media context, the educational context, as well as others (e.g., family, peers, community and political organisations).

The research questions addressed in these papers are framed based on an integrative three-level developmental model, which accounts for group and individual differences in youth's civic and political engagement. The model, which was developed by the first author (Frosso Motti-

Stefanidi) in the context of the Horizon 2020 CATCH-EyoU project, was influenced by theory from Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and from Motti-Stefanidi and colleagues' integrative developmental framework for the study of group and individual differences in immigrant youth adaptation (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017; Suárez-Orozco, Motti-Stefanidi, Marks, & Katsiaficas, in press). The model rests on three key assumptions. First, youth are developing individuals, and, thus, their civic and political engagement needs to be examined in developmental context. Second, their lives are nested in contexts, and, thus, the characteristics of societal and proximal contexts are important influences on their behavior. Third, their own individual characteristics contribute to how, and how much, they will be civically and politically engaged. Based on these assumptions, the backbone of the model is conceived in three levels, i.e., the societal level, the level of interaction and the individual level.

The special issue includes six empirical papers, addressing different dimensions of active citizenship and different processes and contexts that are deemed relevant to explain the construction of youth active citizenship, including societal-level factors (such as policy context and media), as well as interaction-level contexts (such as school and family) and individual-level factors.

The first paper, by **Banaji and colleagues** performed a textual analysis on a large corpus of interdisciplinary literature, which was collected by all consortium partners. Their goal was to investigate and discuss from a critical and reflexive perspective, the ways in which the concept of youth active citizenship, as well as that of civic and political participation, have been addressed by the scientific and academic communities. The authors show that the dominant – normative – conceptions of youth participation and citizenship, as reflected in most of the literature, which underpin and legitimize policies aimed to enhance young people's social inclusion in Europe, may actually produce exclusionary effects. These results may explain the disaffection and lack of trust towards the EU reported by general surveys, for example, among young people with fewer educational and socioeconomic resources. The authors argue that these findings point to the need to adopt a more inclusionary approach to the definition and understanding of young people

engagement in the EU, by incorporating critique and dissent as a means of enhancing the quality and the experience of democracy.

The second paper, by **Landberg et al.**, focuses on the concept of (political) identity as a key indicator of psychological citizenship. The purpose of this study was to examine, first, the interplay between national and EU identification, second, how different profiles of identification vary by participants' age, gender and country of origin, and, third, the link between these profiles of identification with participants' political interest, tolerance and political participation. They used data collected by all consortium members from a large sample of adolescents (16-18yrs old) and young adults (20-30yrs old). To address their research questions, they adopted a person-centered approach. One of the interesting findings of this study concerns a group of young people who, on the one hand, showed lower levels both of national and EU identification, but at the same time displayed high levels of tolerance and participation. According to the authors these findings indicate that focusing on identification per se may be insufficient to understand the psychological dimension of citizenship. Based on their findings, they also point to the need to better investigate the interplay between national and EU identification.

The third paper, by **Dahl and colleagues**, sets out to understand why some young people are politically passive. The authors draw data from all collaborating countries and focus on the adolescent sample (16-18yrs old). They examine two potential explanations for the phenomenon which have been advanced in the literature; namely, apathy, in which case young people lack a desire to take interest in politics, and alienation, in which case youth have a sense of estrangement from politics and government and feel powerless. Apathy is typically more frequent among young people than adults, and reduces motivation for political action. Their findings confirm that political passivity is linked mostly to apathy. In contrast, alienated youth are more likely to adopt unconventional forms of political participation.

The fourth paper by **Serek and Jugert** draws data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study. The data were collected from 22 EU countries. The authors examined,

based on multilevel models, the role of trust (psychological dimension) and participatory practices (participatory dimension) on youth active citizenship. In particular, the authors included individual-level factors (interest towards public affairs and post-materialist value orientations), interaction-level factors (characteristics of schools, such as classroom climate and opportunities to learn about Europe, and characteristics of families) and societal-level factors (country-level characteristics, such as living conditions and social inequalities, and communist past). The findings indicate that European citizenship can be distinguished from general active citizenship on the participatory dimension but not on the psychological dimension of trust. The participatory dimension of EU citizenship is largely dependent on socioeconomic resources at individual, school and country level. Socioeconomic background and opportunities to learn about Europe at school, are more strongly related to participation at European level than at national level. Country level differences in components of active citizenship also emerged, indicating that contexts characterized by economic problems and social inequalities reduce young people's trust in institutions, as well as their participation in cross border activities.

An important factor for young people construction of EU active citizenship is the policy context such as, for example, EU-funded mobility programmes for educational purposes. The fifth paper, by **Mazzoni et al.**, based on data from all consortium member countries, addresses the role of cross border mobility among adolescents and young adults in promoting dimensions of psychological citizenship (identification and positive attitudes towards the EU), EU-level participation and voting intention. Findings confirm the role of both short-term and long-term mobility in strengthening youth's bonds and engagement with the EU, and support the usefulness of European mobility programmes for youth in reaching their aims.

A further relevant context considered by the CATCH-EyoU project is the media context, which plays an important role in reporting EU issues and framing the EU agenda at national level. The sixth paper, by **Macek et al.**, based on data from Czech, Estonian and Greek youth, focuses on factors linked to young people's trust in professional and alternative media. It also examines



whether and how trust is related to their attitudes towards the EU. The findings indicate that trust in alternative media is related to negative attitudes towards the EU, suggesting that media are alternative in a political sense.

Constance Flanagan's discussion emphasizes the importance of the current historical context and of the conditions in which young Europeans grow, for the development of their civic identity, and of an understanding of the social and political reality. It is a generation born in the EU, which experiences what it means to be a European citizen in a different way than adults do. This requires that scientists focus on both EU and nation-level belonging and on the relationship between them. Moreover, she stresses that, if we really want to start bridging the gap between young Europeans and institutions, we need to focus our research effort on understanding the different ways in which young people enact their citizenship (participatory practices), rather than continuing to view young people as "preparing themselves for becoming" adult citizens. This is a key premise of the CATCH-EyoU project, which has informed its whole approach, e.g. by incorporating young people as partners of the consortium. She also stresses a major challenge that the EU project faces, which is linked to current social inequalities affecting different groups of youth across countries. Such inequalities constrain youth's opportunities and resources for learning and experiencing active citizenship in European context.

Together, the papers in this special issue contribute to the development of a new, cutting-edge conceptualization of youth active citizenship in the EU, and to a better understanding of the factors promoting or inhibiting young EU citizens' engagement, participation and active citizenship at the European level. They help fill an important gap in the existing literature, focused mainly on youth's engagement at national or local levels, by emphasizing the importance of including other levels of belonging and citizenship. Furthermore, they allow a better understanding of the challenges youth face in current historical, social and political contexts. The results have significant public policy implications pointing to ways that will allow bringing the EU closer to its young citizens and boosting their participation.

### Disclosure statement

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

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