

Ways of Europe

From Democracy and Youth
To the Future of Europe

Ways of Europe aims to redefine citizen engagement and access to democracy in the EU by amplifying underrepresented voices. Partners of Ways of Europe met in Brussels in February 2025 for a transnational event dedicated to the topics of democracy and youth. The event included a discussion with MEPs and other participants on the role of the EU and civil society, sharing best practices to reconnect young people with politics and the role of art in engagement. The following demands were developed through these discussions.

Too many young people across Europe feel abandoned—not only because they live in the physical margins of cities and rural areas, but because they experience social, economic, and emotional marginality. Insecure housing, precarious jobs, discrimination, and the erosion of public services make it difficult to imagine a future, let alone participate in shaping it. When daily life becomes a struggle, participation starts to feel like a luxury. We demand that the European Union recognize these conditions as central to the crisis of democratic participation. Policies must guarantee the right to stability, dignity, and access to education, housing, and healthcare—because without these, democracy is an empty promise.

We believe that democracy begins in everyday spaces—schools, youth centers, communities—where people first learn to be seen, heard, and to take part. It is built through relationships, trust and shared decision-making. Participation requires presence and care: listening that is relational and political, and spaces that allow people to express themselves and act together. We call for public policies that support these spaces—recognizing non-formal education, community practices, and the vital democratic role of educators, youth workers, and cultural practitioners. Democracy must be lived daily, rooted in equity, creativity, and mutual responsibility.

We demand a fundamental rethinking of the formal education system across Europe. Schools must be more than spaces of passive transmission—they should be dynamic environments where young people learn to express themselves, participate, and take responsibility as democratic citizens. Today, students are too often relegated to a ‘non-knowing’ position, expected to listen without contributing, while spaces for creativity, art, and debate are shrinking. Civic education is frequently reduced to filler time or delivered by unprepared educators, reinforcing the idea that participation is secondary or irrelevant. This undermines young people's belief in their capacity to influence the world around them. The European Union must take the lead in promoting an education system that encourages critical thinking, political agency, and meaningful participation—one that works in synergy with non-formal education, youth work, and community initiatives. A democracy of the future begins with the way we educate today.

We believe that lowering the voting age to 16 is an important step toward political inclusion, but it must go hand in hand with real support for political understanding. In our experiences with *Words of Europe* and *Ways of Europe*, we've seen that many young people—often even those over 18—struggle to connect with politics, not due to apathy but because they lack accessible, meaningful tools to understand it. Today's political landscape is complex, and social media often distorts more than it informs. That's why we call for greater investment in civic

education and critical media literacy, and for formal recognition of the essential work done by youth workers, educators, and associations. A vote should depend on the ability to understand what's at stake—and it is our collective responsibility to nurture that ability in all citizens.

We demand that the European Union prioritize art, culture, and media as essential languages of political engagement. Art is not decoration—it is a transformative practice that fosters expression, challenges dominant narratives, and builds community. Creativity empowers young people, especially those silenced by discrimination or exclusion, to find and use their voice. Institutions must support artistic and digital forms of political expression, spaces that connect local stories to European conversations, and creative practices in education that reach beyond the limits of formal systems.

We demand that **democratic tools like the European Citizens' Initiative and the Conference on the Future of Europe evolve into permanent, effective mechanisms that lead to real policy change**, not symbolic consultations. Participation must be a continuous, lived experience—not an exceptional event—and must be grounded in trust, presence, and shared decision-making. We call for the structural involvement of civil society in policymaking, the creation of democratic spaces at all levels—from local to transnational—and the allocation of adequate resources to ensure that everyone, especially those most marginalized, can participate fully, regardless of legal or social status.

We demand that **all policies within the EU-institutions are being reviewed with an intersectional approach**. Since inequalities are inherently interconnected, policies have to be examined and streamlined on their potential impact on marginalised communities. This assures that no legislation is passed that neglects the impact it has and therefore improves trust in the process and the institutions.

We reject the notion of “impossible cases”. When participation fails, it is not because people are unreachable, but because systems have failed to listen, adapt, and include. We demand that institutions take responsibility for creating the conditions that make engagement possible for all. This means investing in accessible, inclusive, and caring environments—especially for those who face structural barriers. Every person, and especially every young person, has the right to be seen, heard, and taken seriously in shaping the future of Europe.

We call on institutions to strengthen their commitment to inclusion, respect, and equality, by creating effective mechanisms to counter hateful narratives and misinformation that threaten democratic and social cohesion. The European Union must take a firm stand against attempts to divide society and destabilize democratic values.

We envision a Europe that is not only democratic in principle, but democratic in practice—rooted in equity and real participation. This means building a future where democracy is continuous rather than episodic, where participation goes beyond token gestures to become transformative, and where education and care are recognized as political acts essential to justice. We call on institutions, civil society, educators, and young people to co-create this future together.

