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# Structured Dialogue: Engaging the Under-Represented Youth in Decision Making

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Working Paper  
Series

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## **Abstract**

Young people are often underrepresented in planning and decision making. In order to harmonize preferences of young citizens of the European Union, the Structured Dialogue offers participatory options ranging from European youth conferences to national consultations and consultative forums at local level. Based on the evaluation framework for Democratic Innovations the paper seeks to answer the question whether the Structured Dialogue process can be considered as a democratic innovation. Via using V-Dem database and collecting data from the European Youth Forum and its member organizations the paper aims to explain the link between the participatory quality of European democracies and the efficacy of national youth organizations in reaching out young Europeans in frame of the Structured Dialogue process. Authors found that despite those shortcomings that are often characteristic for consultative processes, there is a great potential in the Structured Dialogue.

## **Keywords**

youth policy, participatory democracy, Structured Dialogue

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## Introduction

By under-represented we can understand a large variety of segments such as ethnic, age, gender etc. Over the past two decades there has been significant research interest in young people's underrepresentation in western democracies. There are concerns about young people's disengagement from institutional politics (Dalton, 2008; Deželan, 2015; Kriesi, 2008) and about decline in young people's political engagement (Cammaerts et al., 2014). Young people are often presented as the apolitical harbingers of an incipient „crisis of democracy” (Bessant 2004, Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). To balance the argument that their willingness to participate in politics is descending there is a scientific discussion about how young people may be switching to other forms of non-traditional and political engagement (e.g. direct action) (Norris, 2012) and/or civic engagement (e.g. volunteering) (Pattie et al., 2004; Quintelier, 2007). Some authors herald young people as the innovators of politics, as creators of sophisticated new forms of participation, especially online (Coleman, 2006, Vromen, 2008, Vromen et al., 2015, 2016). It may well be the case that the upcoming generations are simply interested in inventing novel forms of political participation (Phelps, 2012). Participation in democratic institutions is not merely a question of young peoples' interest in politics, but also the result of available mobilization channels (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005, Skocpol, 2003). Thus, youth political participation depends as much on agency as on structure, that is, on the interest of democratic institutions and how open they are to youth participation (Forbrig, 2005). Therefore interest in young peoples' political participation includes understanding the attractiveness of alternatives to traditional political participation and representative democracy.

During the 2000s policy makers of the European Union have recognized the importance of the involvement of the youth<sup>1</sup> into decision making processes. Structured Dialogue is a consultative process implemented by the European Commission between young people and decision-makers in order to set the priorities of European youth policy cooperation. It is an EU-initiated democracy program that ameliorates the institutional context of youth policy in EU member states and contributes to the development of national youth umbrella organizations. Based on constant expansion (e.g. the increase of the number of participating decision

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<sup>1</sup> The EU Youth Strategy does not operate with an official definition for the specific period in life when a person is considered to be "young". This definition varies from one Member State to another and the age to consider differs with time and socio-economic development. As an instrument for implementing the EU Youth Strategy, the "Youth in Action" program targeted and current "Erasmus+" program targets young people between 13 and 30.

makers) and development (more regulated frameworks) of the structure, we can assume that Structured Dialogue can represent a democratic innovation.

The purpose of the paper is to investigate the main features of Structured Dialogue and to answer why Structured Dialogue can be considered as a democratic innovation. As it targets an under-represented group, young people we are interested in the way how it includes them into decision making. Structured Dialogue is interesting because it offers both traditional institutional and non-traditional forms of political participation in order to engage the target group, therefore we suppose that it allows for young people to ameliorate existing decision making platforms. Because it is a multi-level process that supports young people to experiment with new ideas and encourages them to become innovators of political processes we aim to highlight how inclusive forms of engagement are designed at EU, national and local level. By investigating its limitations we also aim to point out to what extent the process is able to handle the political apathy of young citizens of the European Union. Analyzing Structured Dialogue as a democratic innovation can add to the literature on how political structures, processes and debates can better include young people.

First, we describe how Structured Dialogue evolved from the beginning until today and we explain our analytical framework. In order to prove that it is a genuine democratic innovation, the second part considers whether next to a stable and transparent framework, Structured Dialogue brings changes of the political context as a whole. In our analysis we consider Structured Dialogue as a multi-level process and we examine the relations between the different levels. By using Vdem datasets we highlight the quality of European democracies by comparing the level of participation of the whole population of the EU Member States. Then, we investigate the political activity of young people and the effectiveness of Structured Dialogue along the five criteria of democratic innovation. At this step, we use expert interviews and our data that we gained from European youth organizations. Finally, we present our overall assessment in order to initiate a fruitful debate about the characteristics of the process as a democratic innovation designed for activating young people.

### **Structured Dialogue: A Process in Progress**

Structured Dialogue is a consultative process that is under progress. Therefore, our description focuses on a moving target. As we will point out below, during the 6 cycles of the consultation its methods and content has been constantly reshaped and refined by the actors.

The process has evolved in frame of the so called Open Method of Coordination (OMC) within the European Council. Since 2006, Council presidencies cooperate in trios and each presidency has a youth conference that incorporates both a youth event and a meeting of the directors-general for Youth in the Member States (Williamson, 2016). In order to determine the main lines of the coordination of national youth policies the Council may adopt resolutions whereas EU ministers responsible for youth can adopt conclusions. Since EU has supporting competences in the area of youth policy, implementation is the responsibility of the Member States. The European Commission has a limited role (facilitation) in implementing what has been decided in frame of the coordination.

Within that framework multi-speed Europe is a reality: in some countries there is a longer tradition of youth work<sup>2</sup> and stronger emphasis on these policies (main actors work hand in hand: policy makers, ministries, the public administration, youth researcher community and youth NGO-s are strong driving forces), while in other countries that have shorter tradition of youth work, young people have to find their ways for political expression in a situation of less resources at their disposal (Loncle et al., 2012).

Structured Dialogue was introduced as a flexible tool to allow policy makers at EU level to negotiate common goals. The main lines of Structured Dialogue have been launched in 2009, when, in order to strengthen cooperation between the youth and the EU, the New Framework for European Youth Policy was adopted by the Council. The EU Youth Strategy Investing and Empowerment, accepted in the same year, defined Structured Dialogue<sup>3</sup> with young people as a crucial tool that might feed into policy making in Europe. The Strategy requested for setting up a dialogue between young people, youth organizations and policy makers about the issues of European youth policy. According to this document, Structured Dialogue is an instrument to ensure that the opinion of young people is taken into account in defining youth-related policies. In the same year, the EU Presidency Trio of Spain, Belgium and Hungary, the European Youth Forum and the European Commission have established the main coordinating body of Structured Dialogue, the European Steering Committee (ESC). The Committee decides on the

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<sup>2</sup> Youth work encompasses a broad range of activities (e.g. social, cultural, educational, sports-related and political) carried out with, by and for young people through non-formal and informal learning. Its value is recognized in the Council conclusions on youth work (OJ C 168, 14.6.2013) and highlighted in a study (Dunne et al, 2014) released by the European Commission.

<sup>3</sup> Structured Dialogue is financed by the Council Presidency, the European Commission and the European Youth Forum. The National Working Groups are able to rely on the resources of the Youth in Action Program, besides using national financial support or several times voluntary work (Compendium, 15-18).

questions to be asked from young people, evaluates the implementation of the dialogue process, launches the call for the consultation in the Member States of the EU and collects the results of the national consultations. The National Working Groups (chaired typically by national Youth Councils) are responsible for setting up a participatory process with young people in their own national context<sup>4</sup>.

### **Goals of the process**

Structured Dialogue provides a forum between young people and decision makers to discuss the directions and to set the main purposes of European youth policy. Therefore, the process is an opportunity for combating the democratic deficit. Young people have the opportunity to share experiences and perspectives that the political establishment may not have considered (Williamson, 2015). The European Steering Committee is responsible for collecting and determining the results of the consultations for the presidency of the youth conferences. On these forums, decision makers and youth representatives from member states produce recommendations in the form of a declaration after thorough deliberations of common goals and future tasks.

Structured Dialogue has become one of the most important forum for strengthening the youth side in the EU policy agenda. During the past 5 cycles (and the current 6th) the consultation became an engine for diminishing democratic deficit in EU member states. Structured Dialogue provides opportunities for active citizenship and improves the quality of youth policy both at national and both at EU level. As a “hall” of EU Youth Conferences, the purpose of the consultations is to create the common base for EU level dialogues and discussions (Williamson, 2016).

### **Five criteria of democratic innovations**

As a collective citizen involvement, Structured Dialogue focuses on creating deliberative forums to harmonize preferences of young EU citizens. But can it be considered as a democratic innovation? By definition democratic innovation is the successful implementation

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<sup>4</sup> Within the European Union the main actors of promoting innovative solutions for youth participation are youth councils: a form of youth voice engaged in community decision-making. Youth councils exist on local, state, provincial, regional, national, and international levels among governments, nongovernmental organizations, schools, and other entities. National youth councils are umbrella organizations that include a wide range of active young people from youth NGOs to youth sections of the parties.

of a new idea that is intended to change the structures or processes of democratic government and politics in order to improve them. They involve attempts to introduce methods and practices that are more than renovation, minor modification or reform of an existing system (Geissel and Newton, 2012). In order to enable comparative research on democratic innovations, researchers came up with an evaluation framework (Geissel, 2013). In the next part of our paper we shortly present those five criteria that we follow when testing whether Structured Dialogue is a democratic innovation or not. We differentiate for each criteria between the design (original intentions) and its actual achievements (limitations) in practice.

*Participation:* inclusive participation of affected groups and stakeholders, participation of minorities is a key concern when analyzing democratic innovations. Meaningful participation also requires agenda-setting options for participants, transformation of participants' preferences into policies. When the agenda is open, citizens will be able to approach the issues more holistically (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2016). As democratic innovations, per se, do not guarantee equal, inclusive participation (Geissel and Gherghina, 2016) it is important to consider limitations of Structured Dialogue. Without special and continued endeavors democratic innovations are likely to result in exclusive and unequal participation therefore we compare the design of selection mechanisms to the extent to which the design criteria were implemented. Since one of the disadvantages of consultative-discursive procedures is that they may be able to deliberate sophisticated suggestions, but they cannot make any decisions (Geissel, 2012) we will also consider agenda-setting options of participants.

*Deliberation:* following the "deliberative turn" of democratic theory (Dryzek, 2000; Smith, 2009) proponents of deliberative procedures argue that by means of deliberation citizens can reflect and transform their preferences, this way curing the malaise of current representative democracies where the aggregation of citizens' preferences is „too simplistic" and not well thought out (Geissel, 2013). Procedures that seek to involve ordinary citizens in deliberation have taken various forms, the most discussed innovations are deliberative mini-publics (Grönlund, Bächtiger and Setälä, 2014), forums that gather randomly selected lay citizens to discuss salient political issues. However some authors (Fishkin, 2009) argue that without significant incentives (e.g. daily allowances) or compulsion the principle of political equality will be harmed by conducting deliberations in unrepresentative assemblies. As Structured Dialogue is a three step process, meaning that debates organized in frame of it not only take place at EU level, but also at national and local level, we will explain how deliberation takes place within those different contexts.



*Democratic citizenries:* since democratic skills and virtues seem to stagnate in current representative democracies proponents hope that participatory innovations can mend this malaise (Geissel, 2014). The idea that “participation make better citizens” (Mansbridge, 1999) is observed by empirical research on socialization induced by deliberation (Andersen and Hansen, 2007; Grönlund, Setälä and Herne, 2010; Talpin, 2011). Democratic innovations as co-governance and consultative-discursive procedures have positive impact on political knowledge and civic skills of the citizens (Geissel, 2012). In our paper we consider those means that Structured Dialogue offers to young citizens in order to let their “voice” heard about the youth policy of the European Union.

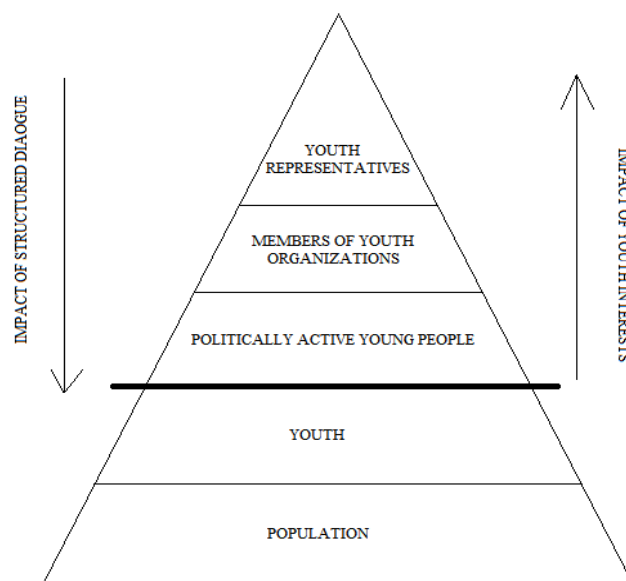
*Legitimacy:* legitimacy may be defined in many different ways, for example input legitimacy refers to the nature of the representation that deliberative democracy allows for, the shape and form that deliberation takes is the focus of throughput democracy, while output legitimacy aims to explain how decisions taken by a few individuals can be generalized and explained to the population in general (Eerola and Reuchamps 2016). In our paper we refer to legitimacy derived by citizens’ political support (perceived legitimacy). Participatory innovations are expected to increase citizens’ support to their political system as they get better involved in the political process. Research on participatory innovations often takes perceived legitimacy into account from the perspective of participants and/or the wider public (Geissel, 2014). There is little research evidence for consultative–discursive procedures launched by the EU. The Harvard Kennedy School has examined two: the European Citizens’ Consultation and Tomorrow’s Europe. Authors found that those public engagement projects have not improved the perceived legitimacy of EU institutions (Culpepper et al. 2008; Geissel, 2012). We focus on the question whether Structured Dialogue is able to create horizontal links between youth representatives and decision makers at EU, national and local level.

*Effectiveness:* participatory innovations are expected to help citizens to attain an outcome that meets their needs and interests, a feature that is not ensured by representative democracies (Geissel, 2014). When considering the effective impact of the deliberative decisions on real world politics (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2016) it is important to note that deliberative procedures are usually consultative, with “little or no impact on public policies” and they have impact “if they are connected to political decision-making bodies” (Geissel, 2012). As Structured Dialogue is linked to the Council Presidency and aims to inform decision makers about young peoples’ opinion, we expect that the process has some impact on youth policy at EU level.

### Limitations of the Structured Dialogue

Compared to other deliberative techniques, Structured Dialogue is unique by putting the emphasis from direct decisions to deliberation and to the determination of common purposes. But since Member States are responsible for implementation, there are good reasons to assume that there is quite a huge range of diversity within the process. Until now, research in democratic innovations has rarely compared effects of democratic innovations taking place at different political levels and in different contexts (Geissel and Gherghina, 2016). As for their deliberative practice, how do methods of consultation differ in Member States? By definition, Structured Dialogue is a consultative process implemented by the European Commission between young people and decision-makers in order to set the priorities of European youth policy cooperation. This definition points on a multi-level relation between decision makers and young people (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Young People and the Structured Dialogue**



The purpose of the Structured Dialogue is to allow young people at EU level to negotiate common goals with policy makers. However, the multi-level character of the process sets limits. According to the logic of Structured Dialogue, we divide the population into five main categories in order to highlight those limits. The first level (population) includes citizens of EU Member States, regardless of age groups. This level might have the weakest relation with Structured Dialogue. Since the main messages of the process target young people, there are good reasons to assume that Structured Dialogue can reach the members of the second level

(level of youth) easier. This category covers (politically active and inactive part) youth of Member States. Within the youth part of European societies there is a smaller, politically active group (third level). At this level, Structured Dialogue might reach out to almost every members of the group. However, these relationships have different strengths. Structured Dialogue can probably connect to the most to the members of youth organizations (level four), who are the most likely to become “the voice of young people”, youth representatives (level five).

As we have shown above, Structured Dialogue is a multi-level process that has different relations with young Europeans. There are good reasons to assume that it can be considered as a democratic innovation as this is (the first) tool of European decision makers to create a dialogue with young people about their proposals and interests. However, research evidence tells us that views of some young people are much more likely to be heard than those of others (Curtis et al., 2004) for instance “engaged” teenagers are more likely to represent their peers than the disaffected (Cairns and Brannen, 2005). As a result, marginalized young people are less well represented. When writing about the limitations of the process we consider whether the Structured Dialogue suffers from similar shortcomings.

## **Data and methods**

This paper investigates Structured Dialogue as a democratic innovation. Since the main purpose is to build a deliberative forum between decision makers and young people at EU level, we assumed that the process works with a very similar efficiency in each EU country. Therefore, the aim of our analysis has been to examine the case of all the 28 Member States. We used three sources of data in a three step method.

Structured Dialogue is a multi-level process (see Figure 1) with different relations to citizens. While some groups (members of youth organizations and youth representatives) are in continuous interaction with it, there are some categories with significantly weaker connection to the process. We assumed that the nature of the national environment (first level) can basically strengthen the efficiency of Structured Dialogue. Therefore, as a first step, we investigated the quality of participatory democratic environment in European countries using Participatory Democracy Index of V-dem dataset (see Figure 2).

As a second and a third step, we focused on third and the forth levels (members of youth organizations and youth representatives) of the model. First, we examined the activity of National Working Groups by using our own-built dataset (see Table 1). We have requested information from the European Youth Forum and also from its member organizations (within

the 28 EU member states) separately. We asked them to share their own statistics how they had contacted young people within the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> cycle of Structured Dialogue and to explain the methods they had used to integrate them<sup>5</sup>.

To confirm our results, as a last step we have made interviews with three members of the National Youth Council of Hungary (NYCH) who were involved in the work of the Hungarian National Working Group. In order to understand Structured Dialogue in a comprehensive way, we asked questions both about the national and the European level of the process. The topics of the interviews were set according to five criteria of democratic innovation.

### **The Quality of Democratic Environment**

The quality of democratic environment (activity of the whole population) can influence attitudes of young people, thus the efficiency of Structured Dialogue. Therefore, we decided to investigate the differences of activity in public affairs via the quality of participation in European countries. For this analysis, we have built a map using data of Participatory Democracy Index of Varieties of Democracy<sup>6</sup> from 2015 (Figure 2).

The V-dem participatory democracy index<sup>7</sup> marks on significant differences in participation at national level, especially when comparing Western and Eastern European countries. In Western Europe (such as UK or France) participation is generally high (marked with green). Our results suggest that people in these countries are more interested in political and public issues, and they are also willing to take part in shaping them. Therefore, we can assume that the efficiency of NGOs is higher here. However, we found a gap between the two parts of Europe. In CEE countries (marked with red) the values of participation are significantly lower: NGOs might find it more difficult to stimulate the activity of citizens. These differences between European democratic environments suggest that post-communist countries have still

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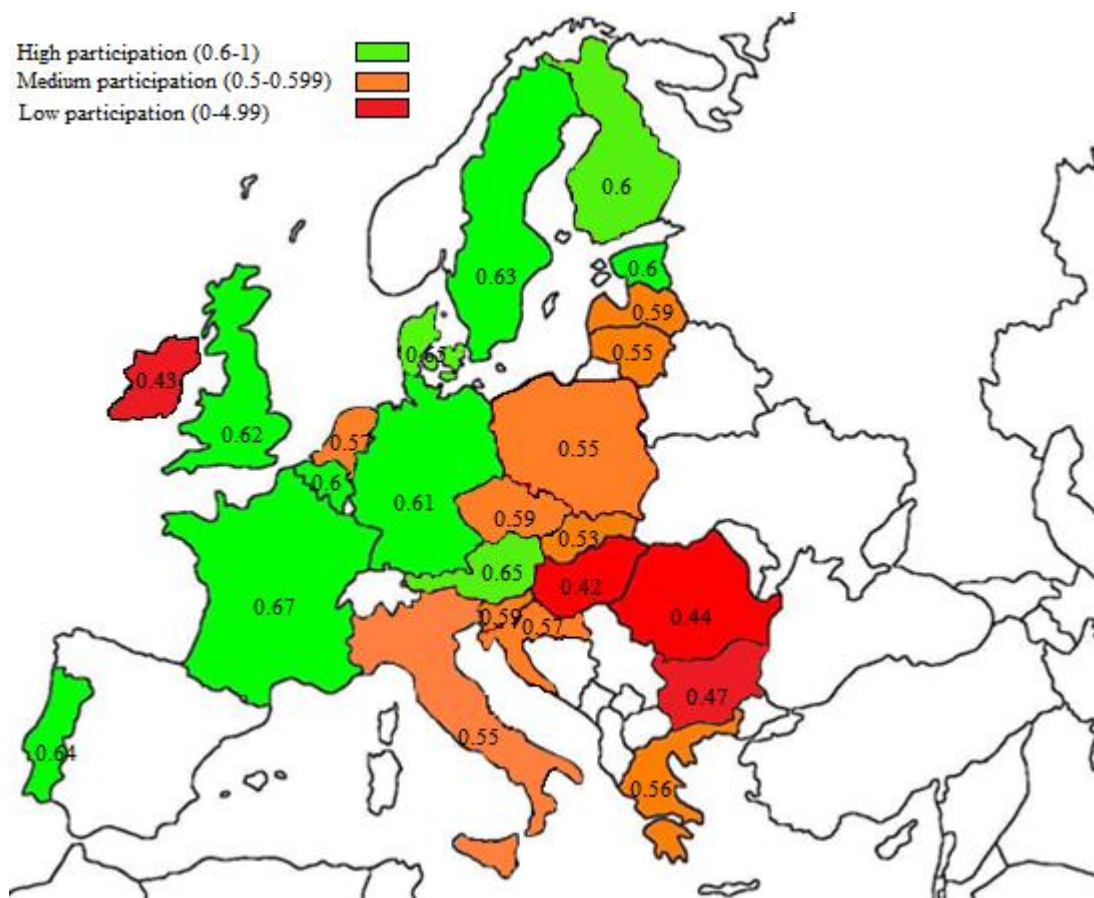
<sup>5</sup> An important challenge of Structured Dialogue is to reach the politically less active or inactive European young people. However, we assume that the stability of interaction channels between youth representatives and politically active young people can influence the quality of the relations between the youth representatives and the whole group of young people. Therefore, this step can help to better understand the nature of Structured Dialogue.

<sup>6</sup> The dataset contains data of the quality of citizen's participation in European countries. The countries are ranked between 0 and 1 according the strength of the participation. 0 marks the full lack of activity and 1 marks the most active participation. We have data from Slovenia, Slovakia, Italy, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Croatia, Czech Republic, Netherlands, United Kingdom, France, Portugal, Denmark, Estonia, Belgium, Germany and Sweden. See: <https://www.v-dem.net>

<sup>7</sup> In this analysis we used three categories to indicate participation in examined countries. Low (with values between 0-0,499, marked with red), medium (with values between 0,5-0,599, marked with orange) and high participation (with values between 0,6-1, marked with green).

not been able to catch up the level of Western-Europe. Difficulties of the democratic transition period and the economic crisis have limited the opportunities to develop the democratic environment of CEE political systems. In countries marked with orange (generally the middle part of Europe, such as Greece or Italy) the low participation has not turned into apathy, but the implementation process of strategies for strengthening activity is presumably not completely developed yet.

**Figure 2: The Participatory Environment in European Countries (2015)**



Source: The authors' map based on the data of Participatory Democracy Index (V-dem)

Our results suggest that EUs ex ante purpose to equalize participation within European countries via using a flexible tool is challenged by current differences of citizens' attitudes toward participation. Differences at national level can influence the whole structure and the work of youth organizations.

## **Structured Dialogue as a democratic innovation**

Structured Dialogue is a unique form for managing the communication between EU decision makers and members of youth organizations. Therefore, Structured Dialogue may represent a new form of democratic innovation. In this section we investigate Structured Dialogue using the five main criteria of democratic innovation.

### *Participation*

At EU Youth Conferences the Structured Dialogue provides opportunities for young people and decision-makers to communicate their interests to each other. The number of youth delegates and decision makers is quasi balanced. At EU youth conferences every Member State is represented by 5 delegates: 3 of them are young people representing their county and 2 delegates come from the Ministry that is responsible for youth policy. This leads to a total number of about 140 participants.

Although theoretically anyone can join we found that there is an admission process that is different among Member States. Some National Working Groups circulate an open call among young people living in their country, others delegate members of the National Working Group and in some countries the national Youth Council delegates three young people from its members. A more transparent selection criteria should be designed, for example randomly selected young citizens or recruitment according social characteristics (Talpin, 2012), to achieve a selection process that could guarantee equal opportunities for participation.

When asked about the inclusiveness of the dialogue at national level, one of our interviewee, former president of the National Youth Council of Hungary (NYCH) highlighted the fact that “participants were those young people who were previously in contact with those NGOs that have promoted the Structured Dialogue”. This is an evidence for self-selection. At this point it is important to underline that „youth organizations are not the only platform for youth voice, even if they claim a strong mandate” (Williamson, 2016). More emphasis should be put on inclusion of non-organized youth.

There is also an example for Structured Dialogue being misused by politically already active strata. Williamson (2016) mentioned the issue of internships being put on the agenda of the structured dialogue, claiming that internships are good options for educated professional young adults, but for the vast majority of young people even the expression is unknown. Therefore recommendations produced through the structured dialogue “may reflect the

position and perspective of significant populations of young people whose views were canvassed, but may not be enough". In that case interests of well-educated young people were pushed through under the cover and rhetoric of participation.

It is important to underline that participants of the EU youth conference cannot make decisions. Participants make common recommendations, joint conclusions and declarations –, "suggestions" for policy makers. They can investigate the "youth side" of the policy issues that are discussed, but the fact that their recommendations are not binding acts for Member States leads to much criticism of the Structured Dialogue.

Although the process has its constraints, it moves on a constant development. In order to reflect on earlier critics, to explore the main weaknesses comprehensively and to find the best solutions to correct them, Council Presidency has allocated significant resources for the continuous monitoring of the process. Structured Dialogue workgroups are requested to monitor how recommendations are implemented at national level in each cycle.

#### *Deliberation*

Structured Dialogue is a special framework where young people and decision makers can sit together and debate on actual youth policy issues. The structure consists of three main levels: debates take place at EU level, at national and at local level.

At EU level each country works in a common and unified framework set by the Presidency Trio. As a general role, each Trio has three conferences, organized by the Member State that holds the actual EU Presidency, with different role depending on its place within the actual cycle. The task of the first youth conference is to define the topic brought up by the EU Presidency Trio from the perspective of young people. The second conference is about phrasing recommendations based on the results of debates and youth research conducted at national level. After the forum, conference decision makers send their feedback to European Steering Committee. The Committee then enables young people to reply to that document of decision makers. The third youth conference screens those recommendations of the second conference that remained on table (based on their relevance). This time, the focus is on the perspective of implementation, participants aim to create an implementation tool box for decision makers.

The high level of rational discourse is supported by joint workshop sessions of youth delegates and representatives of ministries responsible for youth affairs. Youth delegates are



enrolled into workshops based on their former activity in national consultations. Delegates of the ministries are also enrolled into workshops. Bases of debates within the workshops are statements that stem from documents, provided by the European Steering Committee that summarizes results of national consultations provided by the National Working Groups.

**Table 1: Structured Dialogue: Cycle 4 and Cycle 5**

<b>Member organization</b>	<b>N Cycle 4 (number of participants)</b>	<b>N Cycle 5 (number of participants)</b>	<b>Methods (consultation process)</b>
European Youth Forum (aggregated data from member organizations)	40000	65000	Young people who were directly reached by National Working Groups through a variety of ways (such as online, in conversation settings or in video messages).
British Youth Council	2000	2500	Online surveys, focus groups, group workshops.
National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations (LSU)	1100	1100	Focus groups, research through random sample of phone interviews and online survey.
National Youth Council of Hungary (NIT)	2000	2000	Online questionnaire (n=500), focus group discussions, discussions between young people and decision makers, youth conferences.
National Youth Council of Slovenia (MMS)	2000	2000	Focus group discussions with member youth organizations; informal work methods with young people.
Danish Youth Council (DUF)	1392	1092	Quantitative study, carried out by external bureau. Dissemination activities at Folkemødet and Ungdommens Folkemøde.
National Youth Council of Luxembourg (CGJL)	2391	633	CGJL did an explorative survey, to define tendencies for the later online survey. Then did online survey, several focus groups, expert interviews/focus groups, group questionnaires.

Sources: European Youth Forum, British Youth Council, National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations, National Youth Council of Hungary, National Youth Council of Slovenia, Danish Youth Council, National Youth Council of Luxembourg.

Note: The high number of participants reported by the National Youth Council of Luxembourg is due to the Luxembourgish Presidency (during the second part of 4<sup>th</sup> cycle) when Luxemburg hosted a series of youth events.

Following the first conference, National Working Groups are requested to prepare a research at national level to underpin positions of youth delegates coming from a certain member state.



The agenda of the consultation is set by the Presidency Trio. The purpose of those surveys is on the one hand to give a general feedback of the success of past strategies, on the other hand to consult young people on issues brought up by the EU Presidency (see Table 1). The main goal of these steps are 1) to add the national level and 2) to strengthen relations between EU decision makers and National Youth Organizations. As we can see from Table 1, at national level, National Working Groups use different tools to ask for the opinion of young people: they organize focus group discussions, expert interviews and they use random samples of phone interviews and online surveys. Based on the results of the youth research at national level, each Group<sup>8</sup> is required to provide a document that contains the opinion of young people of the given member state.

The third step of the Structured Dialogue happens at local level where dissemination of the main results of the Structured Dialogue process takes place. As an example, in Hungary, National Working Group organizes regional meetings. The essence of those meetings is similar to what happens at youth conferences at European level: a consultation is organized to get young people and decision-makers talk to one another and make joint recommendations. These events strengthen local youth roundtables where local authorities, local institutions responsible for young people and local NGOs can address youth related issues.

### *Democratic citizenries*

By strengthening their skills during youth conferences, forums and workshops, young people may become more competent in debating and creating common purposes. Participants of the EU Youth Conferences have the opportunity to learn how EU youth policy is coordinated among the Member States and they learn how to tell their opinion to decision makers. Those who have been involved in the process could improve their debating skills and negotiating competencies. Structured Dialogue creates an atmosphere for the spirit of discussion, strengthening this way the civic culture of participants.

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<sup>8</sup> Beyond supporting youth research, the Structured Dialogue also creates opportunities to promote construction of new institutions as well, by contributing to the development of national youth umbrella organizations. Contribution is provided mostly by financial resources of the Youth in Action Program of the European Committee and partly by methodological assistance of the European Youth Forum to its member organizations. There is also evidence that the process promoted the construction of new institutions: in Hungary there was no national umbrella organization for youth NGOs until the Hungarian EU Presidency. In 2011 Hungary has managed to overcome this difficulty when setting up the National Working Group for youth affairs. This has led to the establishment of an official National Youth Council in 2012 (Compendium, page 30).

At national level, many of National Working Groups organize trainings for their delegates before they take part in the European Youth Conference. In Hungary, to spread the knowledge they received during the event, the national youth council offers those young people who return from the EU Youth Conference the title „regional ambassador” within the umbrella organization. This way they can help the organization to reach out to local young people in their region.

Hence, at present, the process of Structured Dialogue may influence the preferences and opinions of members of youth organizations (level four) and youth representatives (level five). However by increasing the number of workshops and roundtables at local level, Structured Dialogue could become a new innovative method to decrease the political apathy of young EU citizens in the future.

### *Legitimacy*

Modern democracies can be deepened by enhancing deliberation through the construction of horizontal links between different demo; through the establishment of an active, informed and continuous interaction between politicians, civil servants and citizens based on negotiated rules, norms and values; and the stimulation of public debates based on insights gained through participation and policy interaction (see Bohman, 1996; Fung and Wright, 2003; March and Olsen, 1995; Sandel, 1996).

Structured Dialogue creates horizontal links between youth representatives and decision makers at EU, national and local level. By establishing a continuous policy debate between politicians and citizens and by gaining the constant monitoring of the results of the common work (see Skelcher and Torfing, 2010) young people get better involved in the political process.

Based on our qualitative research made in Hungary, we found that national organizations have an extended strategy to increase the legitimacy of youth policy: they organize workshops, forums, conferences to present the Structured Dialogue process and its main achievements to the public. Hungarian decision-makers both at local and regional level understood what the Structured Dialogue is about and NYCH made a demand for its member organizations to always have local decision makers (local governments, local institutions, local NGOs) at events organized in frame of the Structured Dialogue.

### *Effectiveness*

As to the question whether Structured Dialogue is helpful to identify collective goals it is important to note that during the 6<sup>th</sup> cycle at EU Youth Conferences participants were allowed to propose policy goals to the EU Youth Strategy for 2019- 2027. The consultation had some (limited) impact on EU's youth policy: the ambition of the new European Youth Strategy is to create stronger link between the EU and young people and the final document endorsed the proposed youth goals in its Annex.

During EU youth conferences participants also create implementation toolboxes. Comparing those recommendations to the actual outcome of EU youth policy measures in different EU countries can also be an effective way of checking whether recommendations attain the collective goal at national level or not. According to the president of NYCH the Hungarian national umbrella organization has always used the results of the research conducted by the National Working Group in the process of negotiations with different decision makers. When NYCH negotiated with decision makers at national and local level, leaders of the organization relied on the results of survey research and focus groups.

### **Summary of results**

According to our thesis, Structured Dialogue may present a new form of democratic innovation to strengthen participation of European youth in public policy issues. Based on the evaluation framework for democratic innovations (Geissel, 2013) we sum up the main features of the Structured Dialogue process (Table 2).

One important limitation of Structured Dialogue is connected to participation: consultative-deliberative processes involve a small number of young people (about 140 participants) at EU youth conferences during each Presidency Trio. Although selection processes are different among member states evidence suggests that participants are selected from an already politically active strata of the society, those who were previously in contact with NGOs (self-selection). There is also example for Structured Dialogue being misused by already politically active strata: educated professional young adults push through their initiatives under the cover and rhetoric of participation. The meaningfulness of the process is limited as participants cannot make decisions, they produce recommendations, joint conclusions and declarations for decision makers.

As for deliberation, the Structured Dialogue puts special emphasis on the two-sided communication between youth delegates and decision makers. While EU Youth Conferences create an opportunity to coordinate youth policy at EU level, Structured Dialogue takes place in

various formats (conferences, debates, discussions) at national and local level to bring the common aims and concerns of EU's youth policy closer to young people, diminishing this way the democratic deficit of the EU. As National Working Groups are requested to prepare a research at national level to underpin positions of youth delegates, Structured Dialogue process also contributes to the development of national youth umbrella organizations.

**Table 2: Evaluation Framework for Democratic Innovations (Geissel, 2013) and features of the Structured Dialogue**

Criterion	Intentions of Procedure	Examples of Structured Dialogue	Evaluation
Participation	Inclusive participation	Inclusive participation of politically active individuals, youth NGOs and stakeholders.	+/-
	Meaningful participation	Transformation of participants' preferences into policy recommendations and implementation toolboxes.	+
Deliberation	High-quality public deliberation	Respectful exchange of arguments through youth conferences, workshops, roundtables	+
Democratic citizenries	Enlightenment of citizens	Improvement of debating and negotiation skills, enhanced public spiritedness	+
Legitimacy	Improvement of perceived legitimacy	Attitudes of politically active youth towards the common goals of EU's youth policy	+
Effectiveness	Improvement of effectiveness	Identification of collective goals for the Youth Strategy of the EU	(+)

Source: The authors' own evaluation based on (Geissel, 2013)

Democratic skills of the participants of the Youth Conferences develop as they learn how to tell their opinion to decision makers, improving this way their debating skills and negotiating competencies. The perceived legitimacy of EU Youth policy is improved within the already active strata of society. Structured Dialogue can reach out to active members of youth NGOs and explain the aims of EU youth policy making for them, therefore legitimacy might be mostly improved among them. But so far there has been no evidence collected about the change of perceived legitimacy of the participants.

Overall, Structured Dialogue can help politically active young Europeans to attain an outcome that meets their needs and interests. Based on our results, Structured Dialogue can represent a new form of democratic innovation. However, differences of its implementation within Member States can limit the work of youth organizations.

## Conclusions

Based on the evaluation framework of democratic innovations our analysis found that Structured Dialogue is a genuine democratic innovation, a successful implementation of a new idea that is intended to improve the structures of involving young people into political decision making in the field of youth policy within the European Union. The Structured Dialogue is a genuine democratic innovation, but it is not free from some typical shortcomings of democratic innovations. With a special emphasis on the two-sided communication between youth delegates and decision makers, various formats (conferences, debates, discussions) are offered to organized youth, at EU, national and local level as an alternative to traditional political participation in a representative democracy. Despite those various formats, it remains a consultative forum with limited impact on decision making at EU level.

Another shortcoming of the Structured Dialogue is that it involves a small number of young people and participants are selected from an already politically active strata of the society, those who were previously in contact with NGOs. Educated professional young adults often push through their initiatives under the cover and rhetoric of participation. Other shortcomings of Structured Dialogue stem from the democratic deficit of the EU: in practice, methods of consultation differ in Member States and differences at national level can influence the whole structure and the work of youth organizations. When considering its limitations, we found significant differences in participation at national level, especially when comparing Western and Eastern European countries.

As it is a flexible institutional structure that allows for a multi-level process that creates deliberative forums to harmonize preferences of young EU citizens, further comparative research is needed to unveil its implementation at national and local level. Although our article did mention some good practices developed by National Working Groups, our list is far from being complete. Developed in frame of the Structured Dialogue there might be practices at national or local level that are very effective in involving disadvantaged groups of young people. As our article gave a very limited insight to the impact of Structured Dialogue on national and local youth policies, therefore a more extended investigation is needed. Since Structured Dialogue uses online platforms to reach out to young people, an in depth analysis of online communication can add to our knowledge about new, online forms of political participation. Further research is needed to measure attitude change of participants of the

Structured Dialogue process, especially when considering whether those public engagement events have improved the perceived legitimacy of EU youth policy among young citizens.

Since Structured Dialogue is a “young” process that is according to the EU Youth Strategy for 2019- 2027 in need of renewal, the next few years may bring significant changes in its structure. Future research can help us to see whether changes will lead to the development of the process.

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