



Youth Ideas for the Future of Europe

Lessons Learned from the Youth Participation Project
#EngagEUrCouncil



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About IEP

Since 1959, the IEP has been active in the field of European integration as a non-profit organisation. It is one of Germany's leading research institutes on foreign and European policy. IEP works at the intersection of academia, politics, administration, and civic education.

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Youth Ideas for the Future of Europe: Lessons Learned from the Youth Participation Project #EngagEUrCouncil

1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has experienced multiple crises: the global financial crisis in 2008, followed by the crises in the Eurozone, the migration and humanitarian crisis in 2015, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU in 2018 and its actual exit in 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the ever-accelerating climate crisis. Currently, Europe faces one of the most fundamental crises because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet, the years of continuous crises also motivated a great part of European citizens to become politically engaged – particularly the youth. They advocate for European solutions in view of global challenges, threatening climate change or nationalist and right-wing populism. Younger generations have proven themselves as admonitory agenda-setters that hold the EU accountable to its promises of peace and prosperity as well as values of democracy and human rights. The majority of young Europeans know that failures to act decisively and cohesively against the occurring crises at European level will potentially have grave consequences for their future. It is therefore of crucial importance for EU institutions to encourage young citizens to further engage in policy-making, listen to their concerns and take their visions and solutions into sincere consideration.

In 2020, just before the launch of the Trio Presidency of the Council of the EU¹ of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) started the project “#EngagEUrCouncil: youth participation and youth exchange”.² It brought young citizens from Germany, Portugal and Slovenia together to collaborate and jointly formulate their own ideas for the future of Europe. From January 2020 to June 2021, the participants discussed pressing issues such as climate, migration or health policy and developed concrete policy recommendations addressing the individual EU Council Presidencies. The project provided an opportunity for the young people to discuss their ideas publicly and communicate them to relevant stakeholders and decision-makers.

In the second half of 2021, some of those participants got together in Berlin to refine their ideas in view of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The CoFoE provided the opportunity to further promote the ideas developed during #EngagEUrCouncil and feed them into a wider European debate with the aim to give them greater impact. Additionally, the *European Year of the Youth 2022* further enhances and highlights young people’s contribution to a vision of Europe that works for all – and especially future generations.

¹ Following: Council Presidency or Trio Council Presidency

² Duration 1 January 2020 - 30 April 2022; funded by Stiftung Mercator with additional support by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union as well as in part by the Press and Information Office of the German Federal Government.

This study concludes the project *#EngagEURCouncil* by examining its main results. Close monitoring and evaluation had been an integral part of the project's approach, enabling IEP to draw conclusions on the experience as well as impact of a youth participation project and identify best practices for similar endeavours.

Accordingly, this study has two aims – one is structure-, another content-related. First, in structural terms we will discuss the participants' evaluation of the project's format as well as experiences in order to assess impact and conditions for successful youth participation projects. Second, we will assess whether the ideas developed in the project resonate with the respective Presidency Programmes and relevant political debates. Combining both perspectives will allow us to develop several conclusions that are relevant for youth engagement and participation in the EU. In doing so, the study aims to be of value for all those concerned with youth participation in national and European institutions and non-governmental organisations. The study may also serve as a reminder for decision-makers to consider and seek young people's perspectives on all policy matters and to listen to their concerns and ideas for better and future-oriented policies. For those active in youth engagement activities, it can provide helpful insights inter alia on recruiting participants for similar projects, digital implementation of projects and evaluation procedures.

The study is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of the functions of the rotating Council Presidency within policy-making processes of the EU. Second, the study outlines the approach of *#EngagEURCouncil* and how it enabled young citizens to collaborate and develop ideas on European policy. Third, the project's experiences are evaluated based on the participants' evaluation and lessons learned by the project team. Fourth, the results of the German, Portuguese and Slovenian Council Presidencies will be analysed with regards to the developed ideas. Finally, drawing upon the results presented, the study concludes by formulating suggestions on how to structure participation of younger generations in EU policy-making and political processes.

2. Council Presidencies – between agenda management, brokerage and representation

With its innovative approach addressing the rotating Council Presidencies, *#EngagEURCouncil* calls attention to the crucial role of the Council of the EU for European policy-making. In doing so, it explores the Council Presidency as a momentum for civic and youth participation. In this section we will highlight the functions of the Council Presidency and explain its scope for action as well as possibilities for youth participation. Additionally, the CoFoE is presented as a format for citizens' engagement.

The Council of the EU, jointly with the European Parliament and European Commission, is the main decision-making body of the EU. In the Council, ministers from the governments of EU Member States meet in different formations to coordinate EU policies and adopt EU legislation. The Presidency of the Council occupies a central role in this process and rotates among the EU Member States every six months.

The governance structures of the Council and its Presidency have changed along with the integration process. The increasing scope of European policy dossiers and growing number of members in the Council due to EU enlargement called for better coordination and preparation of meetings as well as adaptation of procedures to ensure effective work of the Council.³ Significant changes have been made through the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, which, among other things, formally confirmed the Trio Council Presidency as the applicable standard model for running the six-month rotating presidencies. Accordingly, pre-established groups of three Member States hold the Council Presidency for a period of 18 consecutive months. The Trios consider the diversity of Member States as well as geographical balance within the EU⁴ and allow national administrations to strengthen contacts and establish efficient workflows in order to ensure smooth transitions between different Council Presidencies.⁵

Each Trio sets long-term goals and prepares a common agenda (Trio Programme), which outlines the topics and major issues that will be addressed by the Council over the 18-month period and functions as the basis for each of the three countries' own and more detailed six-month Programmes. The negotiations on a common Trio Programme usually begin about 18 months before the start of the Trio Presidency.⁶ However, first contacts between diplomats of the Trio and the General Secretariat of the Council (GSC), which supports the drafting process, are established up to four years before the first Council Presidency of the Trio takes up its work.

Vanhoonacker and Schout outline five main functions of the Council Presidency.⁷ First, Presidencies have an administrative function in planning, coordinating and chairing Council meetings. In the management of the daily Council work, the Presidency is assisted by the GSC. Second, Presidencies have a mediation function to facilitate decision-making in the Council. They act as a broker between the EU Member States' preferences and positions, facilitating compromises in order to reach an agreement in the Council. Third, the Presidencies

³ von Ondarza (2020): Rat der EU, pp. 508-509.

⁴ Batory/Puettner (2011): The trio presidency in the European Union of the Lisbon Treaty. The case of the Spanish, Belgium and Hungarian group presidency, p. 3.

⁵ Council of the European Union (2018): Handbook of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, p. 17.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vanhoonacker/Schout (2003): Reforming the EU Institutions - Challenges for the Council. The Rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU: Obstinate or Obsolete, p. 7.

have a representation function, as they represent the Council in its relations towards third countries, international organisations and towards other EU bodies. Fourth, they take on a coordination function by negotiating on behalf of the Council within the framework of the Ordinary Legislative Procedure to reach agreements on legislative files. This also includes the informal, yet very important trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament and the European Commission.⁸ The prevalence of this format has increased with 90% of legislation in the period 2014-19 agreed in this way.⁹ Last but not least, a Presidency has an initiative function and may put forward own interests and proposals, e.g. via its Presidency Programmes.

It is argued that the Council Presidency provides the Member States holding the Presidency with an opportunity to influence legislative decision-making, guide initiatives and affect policy change.¹⁰ The Council Presidency is equipped with far reaching organisational and procedural prerogatives to direct the Council's attention. Despite its brokering administrative role, the Presidency can also influence negotiations during confidential bilateral talks with the other Member States, for instance by prioritising its own interests in meeting agendas or by scheduling votes.¹¹

However, in addition to the requirements to fulfil the Presidency's roles and ensure the functioning of the Council, there are also factors that limit the Presidency's possibilities to follow through on own priorities: depending on the legislation at hand, voting procedures might vary and there might be a need to take decisions of the European Parliament and European Commission into account.¹² Additionally, the Presidency is expected to act in neutral and impartial ways, which means to avoid being guided solely by national interests during negotiations and to consider prominently the general European interest instead.¹³ Its agenda setting function is further restricted in practice as the Presidencies are forced to act on an inherited agenda when tasks and legislative dossiers need to be continued from former Trios or individual Presidencies.¹⁴ In the case of the Trio of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated significant agenda alterations and even shifted the focus of decision-making to the European Council. In light of the manifold administrative duties as well as inherited and unforeseen tasks, putting forth own agendas and pushing own initiatives remains a "Kür" (Free Style).¹⁵

The highly structured policy-making process both in the Council and in coordination with the Commission and Parliament leaves little room for direct forms of citizen participation. Especially the trilogue format has been criticised for its lack of transparency effectively widening the gap between the EU and its citizens.¹⁶ Participation in the drafting procedures of the Trio Programmes is even more difficult due to the extensive preparation and coordination among the concerned ministerial bureaucracies that begin years before the Presidency starts.

⁸ von Ondarza (2020): Rat der EU, p. 510.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Warntjen (2008): The Council Presidency. Power Broker or Burden? An Empirical Analysis, p. 317.

¹¹ Häge (2019): The Presidency of the Council of the European Union, p. 10.

¹² Warntjen (2008): The Council Presidency, p. 317.

¹³ Vanhoonaeker/Schout (2003): Reforming the EU Institutions, pp. 6-7.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹⁵ Tekin/Schubert (2020): Deutschlands "Corona-Präsidentschaft". Weichenstellung für die Zukunft Europas, p. 12.

¹⁶ European Movement International (2022): Citizen's participation and transparency: closing the gap [22 April 2022].

Still, the Council Presidency has an important national dimension and can be instrumental in both bringing the EU closer to its citizens and contributing to the EU's legitimacy. Through the Presidency, European topics potentially receive more press-coverage as well as public attention at Member State level. Additionally, the impact of national governments in the EU can become apparent. A country's Council Presidency can also stimulate national public debates on important European topics and questions for the future of the EU.¹⁷ Hence, it largely depends on the Presidencies themselves to potentially foster opportunity for citizen engagement, debate and participation.

2.1 A laboratory for direct citizens' engagement. The Conference on the Future of Europe

Recently, several tools and procedures have been introduced in the EU to increase citizen participation in policy-making processes. At her inauguration as Commission President in 2019, Ursula von der Leyen announced a deliberative experiment that invited citizens to engage in debates on necessary European reforms. The Conference on the Future of Europe gave Europeans a chance to propose, debate and formulate recommendations on policies.

After intense debate on its structure and mission, the Conference took up its work in 2021, chaired by the presidents of the European Commission, Council and Parliament. The deliberation took place in the Plenary, in Citizens' Panels as well as on a multilingual digital platform.¹⁸ Four European Citizens' Panels as well as National Citizens' Panels in each Member State were set up as a new instrument to facilitate direct citizen participation. The European Citizens' Panels were each made up of 200 randomly selected Europeans from all Member States, representing the diversity of European societies, with one third being people under the age of 25.¹⁹ The participants were tasked with formulating recommendations for the future of the EU in the thematic fields of the Conference, while considering contributions or ideas from the digital platform. The recommendations were then discussed in the plenary and processed into proposals for the final report. The digital platform in particular was a key component of CoFoE as it gave every EU citizen the chance to participate in any of the 24 official EU languages. Citizens could put forward their ideas, endorse other people's ideas and share information on events connected to the CoFoE. Overall, 48,530 contributions were recorded on the platform, with 18,955 ideas, 22,570 comments and 7,005 events covering all 10 topics.²⁰

The CoFoE concluded on 9 May 2022 with the presentation of the final report to the Joint Presidency, including 49 recommendations and 232 concrete measures. It will be a task of the next Trio Council Presidency of France, the Czech Republic and Sweden to broker, manage and represent the policy recommendations and maybe even start a process for treaty changes to transfer them into a legislative process. This once again underlines the important role the Council of the EU plays in policy-making and makes the Trio Presidency a relevant institution for creating links for citizen engagement and the empowerment of young European voices. On the occasion of the Trio Presidency of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, #EngagEURCouncil was set up to empower young Europeans to develop ideas for the future of Europe.

¹⁷ Vanhoonacker/Schout (2003): Reforming the EU Institutions, p. 9.

¹⁸ Plottka/Mintel (2022): Konferenz zur Zukunft Europas, p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kantar Public (2022): Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe, pp. 4-6.

3. #EngagEUrCouncil. Youth exchange and youth participation

Promoting youth engagement falls under the umbrella of promoting active citizenship. Active citizenship entails individuals' willingness and capacity to make use of their civic rights, engage democratically with both peers and decision-makers and inform themselves about pressing issues in the public sphere. Scholars have noted that since the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, European institutions have been increasingly committed to promoting active citizenship.²¹ Qualitatively, existing projects for youth participation often focus on creative approaches towards European policy,²² simulations of decision-making processes or pan-European exchange.²³

The *#EngagEUrCouncil* project based its activities on the momentum of youth organisation and mobilisation. The project's activities focused on training, connecting and empowering the participants from Germany, Portugal and Slovenia to take an active part in European debates. The final goal was to motivate political decision-makers of each Council Presidency to take note of young citizens' ideas for the future of Europe. To do so, *#EngagEUrCouncil* used a holistic approach comprised of four methodological dimensions.

1. Trans- and trinational mobility and networking of young citizens from Germany, Portugal, Slovenia.
2. Constructive and informed debates on European policy in relevant areas based on the Presidency Programmes in order to enable participants to independently formulate feasible policy recommendations for the future of Europe (*YouthIdeas*).
3. Empowering participants to present and defend these ideas to national and European decision-makers as well as their own social networks.
4. Linking the overall process with the rotating Council Presidencies, directly addressing a relevant political institution with agenda-setting competencies, which so far includes little opportunity for direct citizen participation.

Throughout *#EngagEUrCouncil*, the young Europeans worked together in three project cycles for the German, Portuguese and Slovenian Presidency respectively. The participants cooperated in four working groups per cycle, focusing on different policy areas. Their idea creation process was facilitated by various informational and research materials as well as distinguished experts invited by IEP. Based on the provided expertise, the young participants detected demands for action, held interactive debates, tweaked and improved formulations and finally voted on their most convincing ideas to tackle pressing issues. They created ideas for a wide range of policy areas reflecting the current most pressing issues, from climate change to digitalisation, resilience of the EU in crisis, migration and citizen engagement. In the end, they created twelve *YouthIdeas* per cycle. The participants also elected rapporteurs to communicate these ideas externally, who, after each cycle, presented the *YouthIdeas* to decision-makers of the respective Council Presidency as well as the broader public during academic conferences with decision-makers and scholars.

²¹ Bee/Guerrina (2014): Participation, Dialogue, and Civic Engagement: Understanding the Role of Organized Civil Society in Promoting Active Citizenship in the European Union, p. 30.

²² See for example: Europäische Bewegung Deutschland e.V. (2022): Europäischer Wettbewerb [30 May 2022].

²³ See for example: European Youth Parliament (2022): About us [30 May 2022]; Deutscher Bundesjugendring (2022): EU Youth Dialogue [30 May 2022].

In November 2021, IEP brought together 23 participants from all project cycles in Berlin for a networking convention. The aim of the two-day event was to further connect the participants across the different cycles, continue the debate on the future of the EU and to support them in their political engagement through practical skill-building workshops. In view of the CoFoE, the meeting was used to refine existing ideas and to develop new recommendations. The *YouthIdeas* from this convention were then fed into the online platform of the CoFoE to achieve an even greater impact.

The Covid-19 pandemic heavily affected the format of *#EngagEURCouncil*. Instead of personal meetings in Berlin, Lisbon and Ljubljana, the project was adapted to the “new normal”: the different workshop events were combined and transferred to the virtual space. A *Virtual Think Tank* (online learning platform) that allocated informational materials, facilitated discussions and guided the participants through the idea development process became the project’s core. Overall, more than 70 young Europeans became members of the *Virtual Think Tank* over three project cycles. Their work was complemented with four online workshops called *VirtualLabs*. Accordingly, the presentation of the *YouthIdeas* to representatives of the Council Presidency also took place in online conference formats and the participants were tasked with adapting their presentations to capture their audience’s attention through video conferences. Only towards the end of the project was it possible to meet in Berlin in person under strict rules, for the networking event *#EngagEURConference* on the ongoing CoFoE.

The following two chapters will discuss in what ways *#EngagEURCouncil* reached its objectives. We will analyse the success of the project format in facilitating youth engagement and empowerment as well as suggest lessons learned for future projects. We will then continue to analyse the results of the project in form of the *YouthIdeas* to support the notion of the relevance and importance of youth participation in policy-making.

4. European youth engagement and participation: Lessons learned from #EngagEUrCouncil

#EngagEUrCouncil utilized already established approaches of youth participation and engagement in order to guarantee a successful idea development process.

For this purpose, the project implemented four specific dimensions: (1) transnational mobility and networking, (2) knowledge transfer and informed debates, (3) empowerment and training and (4) the link to the Council Presidency as well as to CoFoE as relevant institutions. These four dimensions were evaluated both qualitatively and quantitatively during the course of the project. After every project cycle, a questionnaire comprising 34 questions was sent to the participants. Apart from the four dimensions, it presented participants with additional feedback opportunities and allowed for a continuous evaluation and improvement of the project. The following parts will present the main findings of the evaluation and draw lessons for future youth participation projects.

4.1 Transnational networking

One cornerstone for the success of the project was to bring together participants from different European countries – with special emphasis on those forming the Trio Presidency – and to facilitate a European debate. Young citizens from Germany, Portugal and Slovenia have very different experiences with respect to European integration. For example, the experiences of Portuguese participants during the Eurozone crisis and its fallouts differ greatly from their German peers. Similarly, Slovenian participants have experienced their country's EU accession in 2004 themselves and thus brought in a different perspective on Europeanisation.

Table 1 shows the distribution of participants by country of origin. It demonstrates that about 44% of the project's participants (including all cycles as well as the *#EngagEUrConference* in Berlin in November 2021) were German, while approx. 28% came from Slovenia and approx. 24% were Portuguese. To spread the call for applications, IEP closely cooperated with its project partners Instituto Português de Relações Internacionais (IPRI) in Lisbon and Centre of International Relations in Ljubljana. Additionally, IEP spread the call through mailing lists of national and international youth organisations and networks as well as lists of universities, NGOs and other think tanks. The numbers in Table 1 indicate that there was considerable interest for this project among Portuguese and Slovenian participants. Unsurprisingly, a project conducted by a German think tank led to a higher number of German applications due to a widespread and well-connected network with similar organisations or universities. Still, a majority of participants came from Portugal, Slovenia, other EU Member States or even beyond (in two cases). Accordingly, the evaluation survey of the project showed that all participants in Cycles 1 and 3 agreed that the *YouthIdeas* represented a trilateral consensus from all three countries, while 87% agreed on this sentiment in Cycle 2. The content of the *YouthIdeas* were overwhelmingly supported by 85% in Cycle 1, 79% in Cycle 2 and 92% in Cycle 3. These figures underscore

the project's success in recruiting a nationally diverse crowd and supporting its collaboration on shared goals. *#EngagEURCouncil*'s approach to closely cooperate with local or regional partners was instrumental in recruiting a varied group of participants and offers opportunities for enhancement in future projects. Project managers concerned with youth participation are thus advised to give great impetus to international networking to add a European dimension to their activities.

Table 1: Distribution of origin

DISTRIBUTION OF ORIGIN (in absolute numbers)	GERMANY	PORTUGAL	SLOVENIA	INTERNATIONAL
CYCLE 1	12	5	7	0
CYCLE 2	11	7	8	0
CYCLE 3	10	4	4	5
<i>#EngagEURConference</i>	10	7	7	0
TOTAL	43	23	26	5
%	44,3	23,7	26,8	5,2

Source: own compilation

Another relevant dimension was the gender diversity of participants. As Table 2 shows, a slight majority of approx. 54% of participants in all cycles as well as the *#EngagEURConference* was female.

Table 2: Gender distribution

GENDER DISTRIBUTION (in absolute numbers)	FEMALE	MALE
CYCLE 1	9	15
CYCLE 2	16	10
CYCLE 3	15	8
<i>#EngagEURConference</i>	12	12
TOTAL	52	45
%	53,6	46,4

Source: own compilation

Since men are often overrepresented in decision-making bodies, the gender distribution is regarded as satisfactory. This interpretation is underscored by comparing Table 2 with Table 3, which shows the gender distribution among the participants elected to present their ideas publicly, the so-called "rapporteurs". Comparing these two gender distributions, it becomes clear that although underrepresented among the field of participants, male participants are slightly overrepresented among the rapporteurs (53%). During the *Virtuallabs* the *#EngagEURCouncil* project team made repeated efforts to encourage women to apply for the rapporteur

position. In other words, men were keener to apply for a leading role that includes public speaking in a professional context and were evidently more likely to get elected. This shows that project management should continuously evaluate gender dimensions as well as incentivise and empower women to apply for positions with responsibility within the project processes.

Table 3: Gender distribution among rapporteurs

GENDER DISTRIBUTION AMONG RAPPORTEURS (in absolute numbers)	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
CYCLE 1	1	3	4
CYCLE 2	1	3	4
CYCLE 3	3	1	4
#EngagEUrConference	2	1	3
TOTAL	7	8	15
%	46,7	53,3	100

Source: own compilation

A third dimension of the participants' diversity was age. The age distribution over all three cycles is very even with an average of 23 for all project cycles. This age distribution is closely connected to the education of the participants as a fourth dimension (see Table 4). Out of 74 participants in total, 70 (94,6 %) were either studying or had already earned a university degree (Bachelor, Master, PhD). The remaining four pupils that participated were on track to qualify for university studies via their high school diploma. The vast majority of the participants (approx. 78%) were university students either enrolled in a Bachelor (37%) or a Master programme (approx. 41%). Also, 5 PhD candidates in the fields of biomedicine, European law or political science participated.

Table 4: Education of participants

EDUCATION (in absolute numbers)	BACHELOR	MASTER	PHD	YOUNG PROFESSIONAL	PUPIL
CYCLE 1	6	8	3	3	4
CYCLE 2	10	10	2	4	0
CYCLE 3	11	12	0	0	0
TOTAL	27	30	5	7	4
%	37	41,1	6,8	9,6	5,5

Source: own compilation

Table 5 provides more detailed information on the fields of study of those participants in higher education. It shows that most students in all project cycles were enrolled in political science, European studies or international relations. Somewhat surprisingly, more students from fields such as medicine, pharmacy, psychology

or mechanical engineering and robotics participated than law students. These figures indicate the success of the recruiting efforts to engage young citizens who are not dealing with matters of European politics in their own study programmes.

Table 5: Disciplines of studies

DISCIPLINES OF STUDIES (in percentages)	LAW	SCIENCE	ART
CYCLE 1	10	30	60
CYCLE 2	5	18	77
CYCLE 3	4,2	20,8	75

Source: own compilation

These figures reflect the challenge that well-educated, academic citizens with high interest in matters of the European Union often apply for participation projects.²⁴ This evaluation has to some degree confirmed challenges for youth participation projects that are generally highlighted in the literature. While the participants were diverse regarding nationality and gender, it remains a challenge to reach a wider variety of participants in terms of age and educational background. Through close cooperation with the project partners in Portugal and Slovenia, #EngagEurCouncil has succeeded in recruiting young students in particular. However, in order to attract even younger participants – especially pupils and young people in vocational training – an even more targeted and structurally embedded application process is necessary.

Project managers should be aware of the challenges during recruitment processes and thus invest adequate financial, human and temporal resources into the call for application. Increased national and international cooperation can help identify accelerators and distributors for such calls, while working with schools can benefit turnout of participants with different socioeconomic, ethnic and educational backgrounds.

Lessons Learned I: A broad European network and a guided, structurally embedded recruitment process increase the project's success.

²⁴ Friedrich/Hoffmann-van de Poll (2019): Partizipation als Meinungsabfrage oder Beteiligungsmechanismus?, p. 75.

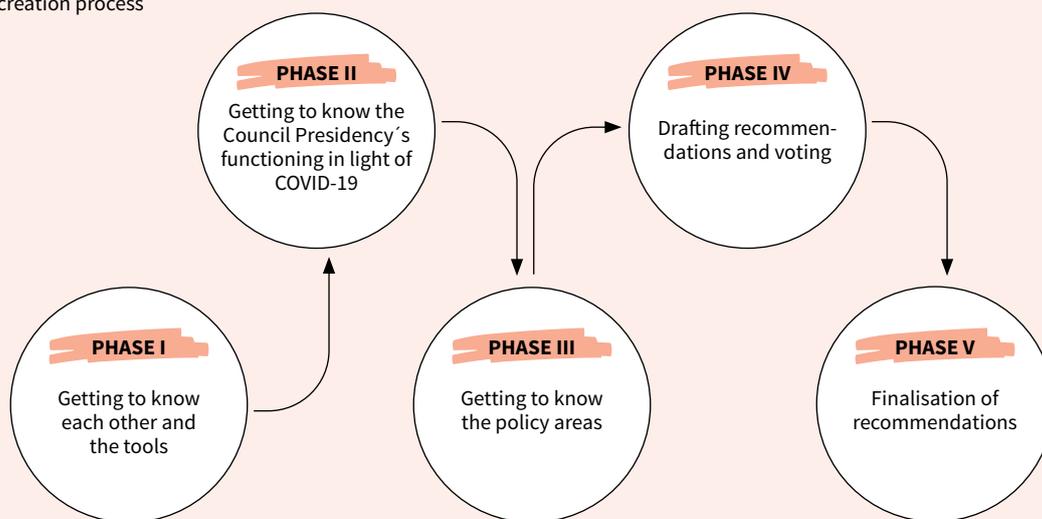
4.2 Informed debate, knowledge transfer and digital implementation

The central aspect of the project format was to create an opportunity to empower young people to engage and develop their ideas based on information and knowledge. When travel restrictions became vital for stopping the spread of Sars-CoV-2 in spring 2020, all planned in-person meetings had to be cancelled and a digital strategy was developed quickly. The project was adapted with a *Virtual Think Tank* at its core, which served three purposes: structuring the idea creation process, serving as a knowledge hub as well as a forum for debate and voting. As the project progressed, it became clear that the digital implementation had substantial benefits: it allowed participants to attend meetings from anywhere, use digital tools such as “Mural” or “Wonder” and to collaborate on formulating ideas in real-time.

Using the platform “Senaryon”, the *Virtual Think Tank* was set up by IEP together with Berlin-based company Planpolitik, which specialises in simulation games for political decision-making. Accordingly, the *Virtual Think Tank* structured the idea creation process along different phases. (See Figure 1). As early as in their application to the project, participants identified specific policy area of their interest. Accordingly, four thematic working groups were established in the *Virtual Think Tank* of each project cycle (e.g. Health Policy, Foreign Policy or Digitalisation). To facilitate an informed debate and lay the foundations for a targeted idea development process, comprehensive dossiers on Council Presidencies, EU decision-making and the respective policy areas were at the participants’ disposal during the *Virtual Think Tank*. In each working group, the participants were able to formulate, discuss and vote on ideas they created. At a later stage of the project cycle, they were also able to debate and vote on ideas of the other working groups to carve out a trilateral consensus on the ideas of the participants from Germany, Portugal and Slovenia.

The online discussions during the *Virtual Think Tank* were accompanied by four digital meetings called *VirtualLabs*. In the first meeting, participants were welcomed and given information on the course of the cycle as well as the *Virtual Think Tank*. Several different activities were conducted for introduction and getting acquainted with each other. For the second and third *VirtualLabs*, IEP cooperated with experts from the Portuguese or Slovenian partner institutions as well as from renowned institutions such as German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP), Hertie School of Governance or German Council on Foreign Relations (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, DGAP). They supported the participants by giving inputs on the rotating Council Presidency or the respective policy areas. The experts were not only essential for a proper knowledge transfer and thus facilitating the informed debate during #EngagEUrCouncil, they also helped to structure the idea creation process by pointing out relevant actors, ongoing proposals and academic discussion. During the fourth *VirtualLab*, the participants finalised their ideas, refined formulations and elected rapporteurs who later presented the *YouthIdeas* to decision-makers of the Council Presidency.

Figure 1:
Phases of the #EngagEUrCouncil
idea creation process



Source: own

The evaluation conducted after each project cycle highlights a high level of satisfaction of the participants with the project's outcomes. In terms of knowledge transfer, at least 93% of participants in all cycles improved their understanding of Council Presidencies. Additional knowledge gains were measured by reference to a better understanding of the Council of the EU, the EU in general as well as the respective policy areas. Similar positive feedback was received regarding satisfaction with the expertise of experts during the *VirtualLabs*: in Cycles 2 and 3, all participants regarded the expertise as either "good" or "very good", while 86% in Cycle 1 thought the same. Looking closer at these cumulative figures, the increase of satisfaction with the experts is most prominent in the "very good" category: while 43 % of the participants rated their satisfaction with the experts as very good in Cycle 1, the satisfaction rose to 57 % in Cycle 2 and even to 69 % in Cycle 3. Additionally, the evaluation survey included questions on the methods and tools used: for instance, the participants were asked about different formats to make the *VirtualLabs* more lively, about their ability to focus, the preferred length of sessions or about features they wanted to include in the *Virtual Think Tank*, so that these aspects could be adjusted accordingly.

The general structure of combining the *Virtual Think Tank* with *VirtualLabs* was a beneficial practice. Still, the project team took the evaluation and feedback from participants into sincere consideration, with the aim to continuously improve the digital implementation of the project. One major area for improvement was networking and getting acquainted with other participants. Since the young people's professional and social lives were particularly disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, they repeatedly expressed their desire for social interaction and encounter. Thus, in Cycle 2, more emphasis was put on interactive activities to

connect participants. This was again further advanced in Cycle 3, by offering voluntary extra activities after each *VirtualLab*. These additional activities included digital games (e.g. quizzes) and a shared space for open communication and getting to know each other. The evaluation showed that about half of the participants in Cycle 3 took part in these activities at least once, of which 90% agreed that they improved their overall project experience. Looking at the general satisfaction with the project, the efforts for continuous improvement seemed to pay off: while in Cycle 1, an average satisfaction score of 6.8 from 10 possible points was measured, this improved to 7.9 in Cycle 2 and even 8.5 in Cycle 3. These findings also highlight the importance of creating a group spirit in order to agree on a trilateral consensus for the *YouthIdeas* mentioned above.

The general satisfaction with the project became also evident in the qualitative part of the evaluation survey. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were given the chance to voluntarily add general feedback. This proved to be very valuable for improving the project since the answers accentuate the networking dimension of *#EngagEUrcouncil*. The participants expressed their joy in collaborating with fellow (EU) citizens and autonomously coordinated and collaborated among themselves. Additionally, in the survey they offered ideas on how to facilitate even more contact to improve cooperation in the working groups.²⁵

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As a working group we organized zoom calls in-between, so we gave each other feedback even if our proposals didn't make it through and I think this would be a nice experience for all participants.

Likewise, the in-person event *#EngagEUrcouncilConference* received similar positive feedback: 88% of respondents of the evaluation survey expressed their satisfaction with the results of the network convention and the same number of interviewees felt represented by the developed ideas. Furthermore, all respondents agreed that their understanding of the CoFoE improved and, additionally, they would recommend participation in the project to a friend.

²⁵ “Also maybe an assigned ‘chair’ to keep the working group on track would have helped a bit”; Institut für Europäische Politik (2022): *#EngagEUrcouncil* evaluation survey results (internal use only).

From these findings, we conclude a second lesson relevant for similar projects: The success of the project is facilitated by a structured idea development process, leaving enough time for deliberation among the participants and including expert input to enrich the policy debate. At the same time, continuous evaluation and adjustments are key for a successful participation project – especially in terms of opportunities for participants to get to know each other. Online implementation is facilitated by tools such as common virtual platforms and workspaces that allow for discussion, information, file-sharing and real-time collaboration. Extra effort should be invested in creating and facilitating social connections and group bonds.

Lessons Learned II: Establishing a common workspace that engages participants is key. Continuous evaluation enables successful adjustments.

4.3 Council Presidencies: platform and participation opportunities

#EngagEUrCouncil linked into the established tradition of TEPSA's Pre-Presidency Conferences (PPC) to present the *YouthIdeas* to representatives of the Council Presidencies. These events summon academics and researchers, policy-makers, media and civil society representatives in order to discuss the agenda and challenges of the upcoming Council Presidencies as well as present recommendations.²⁶ Embedded into this professional platform, elected rapporteurs presented the *YouthIdeas* to the attending stakeholders. The PPCs traditionally include a presentation of recommendations to a representative of the Presidency by the TEPSA members. The Programmes are usually introduced and discussed by high-ranking government representatives: the German Presidency Programme was presented by Axel Dittman (Director for EU Institutional Affairs, Brexit, EU Coordination, and EU2020 Presidency in the Federal Foreign Office), the Portuguese Programme by Ana Paula Zacarias (Secretary of State for European Affairs in the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Slovenian Presidency Programme was presented by Gašper Dovžan (State Secretary, Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The project succeeded in also including the presentation of the *YouthIdeas* as part of this panel and following discussion, which was highly beneficial to the youth empowerment in four ways.

First, the presentation of the *YouthIdeas* in front of an audience of renowned scholars and high-ranking politicians underscored the professionalism of the project. On the one hand, the participants of *#EngagEUrCouncil* proved their creativity, knowledge of relevant proposals and understanding of the state of play in European policy. On the other hand, they received valuable feedback by professional academics and government officials of the Council Presidencies who reacted directly to their ideas.

Second, this opportunity for direct feedback made it possible for the participants to engage in a dialogue with decision-makers on a panel, instead of handing in their ideas anonymously. While the Council Presidencies' Programmes were already drafted when the PPCs took place, the conference format still constituted a valuable linkage between decision-makers, academia and wider civil society.

²⁶ TEPSA (2022): Pre-Presidency Conferences, [07 June 2022].

Third, the opportunity to present the ideas before a professional audience further enhanced the empowerment dimension of #EngagEURCouncil. The rapporteurs were elected by their peers and received special public speaking training sessions before the PPCs to improve their presentation skills. Feedback from the PPC audiences indicated both high satisfaction with their presentation as well as with the contents of the *YouthIdeas*.

Fourth, the *YouthIdeas* were also sent in a written form to Council Presidency officials and scholars to increase their impact. Rather than just having a singular event, this made it possible to remind the decision-makers of the *YouthIdeas* during the whole Presidency term. In doing so, the participants' demands and suggestions could be further discussed and considered later.

While the PPCs proved to be a good opportunity for presenting the *YouthIdeas*, their tight schedules often did not offer enough room for longer discussions between participants and professionals. Thus, in the later-added project cycle on the CoFoE, the project addressed this issue and organised a public panel debate that allowed rapporteurs to discuss the *YouthIdeas* for the Conference on the Future of Europe with members of the Conference Plenary. The rapporteurs elected during the #EngagEURConference event in Berlin in November 2021 first presented the ideas to Daniel Freund (Member of the European Parliament, Greens/EFA) and Nik Prebil (Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, List of Marjan Šarec LMS). Afterwards, they were able to discuss the *YouthIdeas* in greater detail with both representatives, which improved the satisfaction with the impact of the cycle among participants. Another finding of this study is therefore the importance of creating settings that offer young participants (more) opportunities to debate their concerns with professional policy-makers and researchers. To be taken seriously, formats such as panels, public debates or townhall discussions are adequate ways for (young) citizens to interact with decision-makers on an equal footing. Given the opportunity and adequate support, they are well-equipped to articulate, explain and defend their political demands.

Lessons Learned III: Youth empowerment and engagement are facilitated by relevant platforms to formulate and discuss perspectives on an equal footing with professionals and policy-makers.

5. Young European citizens as idea providers

This chapter takes a closer look at the concrete ideas of each *#EngagEURCouncil* cycle (including the *#EngagEURConference* event), contrasts them with the respective Council Presidency Programmes of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia and discusses whether the results of each Presidency align with or mirror these notions. We do not structure the assessment of the ideas in line with the individual Council Presidencies but rather cluster them into policy areas of (1) Climate Policy, (2) Foreign Policy (3) Resilience and (4) Social Policy to reflect the interconnectedness of issues and policy areas, as highlighted by the *#EngagEURCouncil* participants in their collected *YouthIdeas* across all project cycles.



5.1 Climate Policy

The issue of climate and environmental policy was a core concern discussed by the *#EngagEURCouncil* participants. They underlined the danger of ambitious climate policy goals taking a backseat amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and not being a key focus of subsequent measures to promote recovery and resilience. To counteract this possible development, their ideas first and foremost highlighted the complexity of the climate crisis and the resulting need to address it in a comprehensive manner rather than approaching it as an isolated issue. Because the young participants argue that all areas of society, economy and policy need to be taken into account, many of the *YouthIdeas* focus on environmentally sustainable solutions.

The specific ideas for European environmental policy ranged from paving the way for the introduction of a European Carbon Tax and harmonising already existing carbon taxes, to increasing funds from the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to kick-start green businesses and technologies or fund climate-friendly agriculture. In order to pursue a more overarching approach, the *YouthIdeas* also propose to actively include citizens in the green transformation and call for more participatory policy-making. To that end, they call for accessible funding for local citizen's climate initiatives or a bi-annual European Citizens' Assembly on current climate policy proposals.

Lastly, the participants also formulated ideas that would have a direct and more tangible effect on European citizens' life. The *YouthIdeas* propose, for instance, allocating a larger budget for the Connecting Europe Facility on Transport in order to improve national railway infrastructure and build a wide and fast European railway system, or aligning existing national recycling and deposit systems to create European standards and foster a "Circular EUconomy".

Likewise, the three Presidencies have pledged their commitment to creating a climate-neutral Europe by 2050, in accordance with the Paris agreement.²⁷ While Germany, Portugal and Slovenia all set different priorities, the main focus was on advancing, negotiating or revising climate legislation, pursuing measures to establish a circular economy and to protect and promote biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources.²⁸ Similar to the *YouthIdeas*, the German Presidency explicitly highlighted in its Programme the importance of considering any climate efforts in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated social and economic consequences,²⁹ as well as treating the issue in a comprehensive manner based on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.³⁰ While not all specific *YouthIdeas* are taken up in the Programmes of the three Presidencies, similar foci become apparent: for example, implementing measures to structure a circular European economy or the modernisation and expansion of the European railway system. The main aspect that stands out, however, is that both the *YouthIdeas* and the Council Presidencies understand the climate crisis as a complex cross-cutting issue that requires not only targeted measures against environmental problems but must be thought of in a more all-encompassing way. While the Council Presidencies emphasise that change must be “economically balanced and socially fair”,³¹ the #EngagEUrCouncil participants go a step further and formulate the necessity of a climate-focused restructuring of both economy and society.



5.2 Foreign Policy

All project cycles of #EngagEUrCouncil laid a strong focus on advocating European values in relation to issues of foreign policy, trade policy and migration policy. While the idea development processes in all cycles took place before the currently ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, the participants considered the deterioration of the political situation in the EU’s neighbourhood in the idea drafting process and criticised existing shortcomings of the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). However, the participants highlighted the EU’s capability and responsibility to actively shape the global order and defend democratic values internationally. To this end, the *YouthIdeas* call on the EU to pursue a values-based foreign policy that allows the EU to act in a united and swift manner and suggest the extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) as the best tool to achieve a more efficient and coherent CFSP. From the young perspective, this would help the EU achieve strategic sovereignty and overcome its inability to act in certain scenarios. In light of the recent thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea as well as violence against and exploitation of asylum seekers inside the EU, the participants also developed ideas focusing on humanitarian values, particularly in the field of migration policy. These ideas include disbursing funding for search and rescue missions, stopping the criminalisation of organisations that support and provide aid to refugees and supporting local as well as regional coalitions of the willing.

²⁷ Germany/Portugal/Slovenia (2020): Trio Programme of the Council of the European Union (1 July 2020 – 31 December 2021), p. 19.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Germany (2020): Programme for Germany’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union (1 July to 31 December 2020), p. 15.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

³¹ Ibid., p. 15.

Lastly, the #EngagEUrcouncil participants stressed the potential of foreign trade policy as a means to further advocate European values on the international stage and to boost the EU's political weight in a globalised world. On that account, the *YouthIdeas* encourage the introduction of red lines and stricter limits in free trade agreements to promote environmental standards and human rights outside the European borders, for example in the negotiations for a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China. The suggested limits exceed trade and sustainability chapters that currently exist in some trade agreements and are more stringent than the currently proposed investment and sustainable development chapter in the CAI, which for instance does not specify definitive environmental thresholds.³²

The fundamental demand of the #EngagEUrcouncil participants is also reflected in the Programmes of the three Council Presidencies: in the joint 18-month Programme of the Council, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia state to pursue measures that “increase the EU's capacity to act decisively and in unity to effectively promote Europe's interests and values and to defend and further shape a rules-based international order, in line with international law and human rights [...]”.³³ Although not all youth demands, such as a humanitarian-based asylum policy, can be found one-to-one in the Presidency Programmes, which aim at creating a more effective as well as rules and values-based system, the same or similar issues are given importance by the three Presidencies. This also becomes clear when looking at the youth demands for red lines in free trade agreements. The Portuguese and Slovenian Presidencies in particular emphasise the revision of the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Regulation (GSP) as a way to reinforce environmental and social values in international trade.³⁴ Albeit the GSP having less of an impact, as it does not equal a trade agreement, the Trio Presidency as well as the *YouthIdeas* strive for increasing the EU's global competitiveness and combining this political weight with advocacy of a rules-based international trading system.



5.3 Resilience

In the face of the current global health crisis, the increasingly acute climate crisis, rising threats to democracies worldwide as well as additional disruptive changes that can be expected to emerge in the coming years, resilience was a topic of major interest for the #EngagEUrcouncil participants. They accentuated three dimensions of resilience, which, if combined, yield a differentiated but comprehensive and cohesive approach to maintaining and enhancing the EU's resilience as well as its capacity to act.

The first layer to this approach addresses an institutional resilience through the usage and distribution of EU structural and investment funds. The *YouthIdeas* propose a new mechanism in the Multiannual Financial

³² European Commission (2021): EU-China agreement in principle, Section IV: Investment and Sustainable Development.

³³ Germany/Portugal/Slovenia (2020): Trio Programme, p. 23.

³⁴ Portugal (2021a): Programme for the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, p. 35; Slovenia (2021a): Programme for the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, p. 39.

Framework (MFF) that counters corruption and augments transparency and accountability, in order to increase citizens' trust in not only their national governments, but the European project.

Second, the *YouthIdeas* focus on economic resilience by highlighting the interconnectedness of digitalisation and sustainability. The participants argued that by focusing on digitalisation and Europe's promise to build its Digital Strategy around responsibility and ethical considerations, a green, digital and responsible economic transition can be achieved. In order to strengthen economic resilience, the *YouthIdeas* for instance propose to encourage sustainable entrepreneurship through a centralised sustainability fund for digital small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and to tax big and multinational corporations in the digital sector to additionally free funds of the European Green Deal (EGD) Innovation Fund and shift them to support green and digital start-ups.

The third aspect concerns civic resilience. Given the rise of populist movements and parties as well as growing Euroscepticism in many European countries, the *#EngagEUrCouncil* participants suggest the empowerment of people as active European citizens through participation measures. To this end, the ideas include for instance the foundation of a regular European citizens' assembly to induce meaningful engagement with the decision-making processes or the creation of a unified political science education hub, which not only aims at already interested people, but enlarges the target group to include a wider spectrum of European voices.

In accordance with the general political discourse, the reinforcement of European resilience was the overall and dominant goal of the Trio Presidency and as such runs like a common thread through all objectives of the different Programmes. The generally perceived seriousness and urgency of this issue is also shown by the fact that many of the *YouthIdeas* are reflected in similar form in the various Council Presidency Programmes, particularly in regard to economic resilience. The Portuguese presidency for instance declared SMEs to be the "focus of the Presidency's attention",³⁵ and has adopted several documents, such as the Declaration "A Green and Digital Transformation of the EU", in which it states to "consider the use of EU funding programmes [...] to support the European green tech start-ups and SMEs".³⁶ The Slovenian Presidency has placed special emphasis on the digital transformation and outlined its focus on several taxation issues, including digital taxation.³⁷ Altogether, the Presidency Programmes and the *YouthIdeas* alike stress the significance of increasing the EU's economic sovereignty as well as strengthening the trust of society in the EU, in order to cope with and survive crises with little or no damage.

³⁵ Portugal (2021a): Portuguese Programme, p. 18.

³⁶ Portugal (2021b): A Green and Digital Transformation of the EU, p. 3.

³⁷ Slovenia (2021a): Slovenian Programme, p. 21.



5.4 Social Policy

The past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic brought along a multitude of national and EU-wide social protection measures aimed at mitigating the effects of the global health crisis for European citizens. The *#EngagEUrCouncil* participants argued that social and economic inequalities have risen sharply since the start of the pandemic, which has revealed the shortcomings of existing social policy and the neoliberal agenda in general. They recommended a renewed focus on social policy, while transferring more competences away from the Member States to the EU. As such, the *YouthIdeas* suggest the prioritisation of measures that strive to close the gender pay gap and support an adequate and Member State-specific minimum wage in the EU, similar to the European Commission's proposal from 2020.³⁸ Because this topic is closely connected to the pandemic, which has been an omnipresent challenge for policy-makers as well as citizens over the past two years, the young participants also developed ideas on how to make European health policy fairer and more effective. The participants strongly advocated for measures such as waiving intellectual property rights to ensure an equitable Covid-19 vaccine distribution, or collaboratively monitoring domestic and transnational migratory patterns to better address health workforce shortages and improve working conditions for this profession. The participants further argued that a deepened Health Union, based on best-practice guidelines, or a more integrated insurance system with an EU-wide patient database, would not only help ensure the right of health to every European citizen, but also aid a coordinated response to the pandemic.

With the beginning recovery from Covid-19 came a resurfacing of the EU's social ambitions that was also visible within the objectives of the Trio Council Presidency. While it was not the comprehensive comeback of social policy, as argued for by the *#EngagEUrCouncil* participants, all three Presidencies pledged to establishing measures that counter the social consequences and inequalities of the pandemic and proclaimed to "implement[ing] the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights".³⁹ Organised by the Portuguese Presidency, European leaders met in Porto for the Social Summit in May of 2021 and adopted the Porto Declaration, which commits to, amongst other things, working "actively to close gender gaps in employment, pay and pensions [...]".⁴⁰ The presidencies have also emphasised thinking health as an international or European issue that relies on a functioning and resilient infrastructure.⁴¹ As such, the Slovenian Presidency, in particular laid a focus on deepening the European Health Union and increasing European preparedness and coordination for future pandemics or health crises, by agreeing on several legislative proposals that strengthen existing health agencies and establish the new Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority

³⁸ European Commission (2020): Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on adequate minimum wages in the European Union, COM(2020) 682 final.

³⁹ Germany/Portugal/Slovenia (2020): Trio Programme, p. 4.

⁴⁰ European Council (2021): The Porto Declaration.

⁴¹ Germany/Portugal/Slovenia (2020): Trio Programme, p. 3.

(HERA).⁴² While, again, not all *YouthIdeas* can be found in equal measure in the Presidency Programmes, the #EngagEurCouncil participants and the three Presidencies have identified similar shortcomings in European social policy, found that the pandemic has had a negative impact on social equality and revealed structural flaws in the European health system.



5.5 Conference on the Future of Europe

On 9 May 2022, the Conference on the Future of Europe concluded with European citizens presenting 49 reform proposals for the future of the EU, which are characterised by pro-European, integrative and hopeful ideas. Again, the recent catastrophes - the environmental and health crises as well as the war in Ukraine - seem to have caused a desire for a more capable and autonomous EU. The *YouthIdeas* argue along similar objectives and reasonings for action as the reform proposals suggested by the Conference Plenary.

In the field of climate change and the environment, the CoFoE proposals suggest climate-friendly agriculture and food productions through sustainable farming in order to achieve climate goals and ensure food security.⁴³ Likewise, in an effort to promote a circular economy an emphasis is put on waste reduction, harmonising production systems and investing in reusable materials.⁴⁴ The development of a European public transport network and eco-friendly railroad technology as a means of connecting urban as well as rural regions in a modern and green manner can also be found.⁴⁵

Regarding matters of Foreign Policy, the *YouthIdeas* and CoFoE proposals overlap on several issues. As such, the proposals also request the EU to do more to enforce ethical and sustainable dimensions in international trade agreements.⁴⁶ Additionally, one of the most prominent *YouthIdeas*, the expansion of QMV in CFSP as a way for the EU to improve its ability to take quick and effective decisions, is also featured in the CoFoE proposals.⁴⁷

In order to make the EU more resilient, the prioritisation of investments in sustainable growth and digital transformation can be found in a variety of proposed measures of CoFoE⁴⁸ as well as in the *YouthIdeas*. The CoFoE proposals also include putting increased efforts into providing European citizens with information

⁴² Slovenia (2021b): Priorities.

⁴³ Conference on the Future of Europe (2022): Report of the final outcome, p. 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 63-64.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 64; p. 83.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 54-55; p. 77.

and education on EU decision-making processes in order to foster a better understanding of the EU and its impact on citizens' lives. Additionally, the proposals of CoFoE ask the EU to explore and provide a suitable variety of direct participation possibilities.⁴⁹ Most interestingly, the proposals also recommend the inclusion of youth perspectives through a Youth-check of legislation, which entails an impact assessment and consultation mechanisms. Similarly, youth organisations should be strengthened as structural partners in this process.⁵⁰

In the field of social policy, the call for the creation of a European Health Union including the availability of European health databases and better working conditions for health care workers mirror the *YouthIdeas* approach.⁵¹ Lastly, measures to close the gender pay gap and ensure a minimum wage, as called for in the *YouthIdeas*, can also be found in the proposals of the CoFoE.⁵²

Overall, the *YouthIdeas* created during #EngagEUrCouncil, the demands brought forward during the CoFoE and the Programmes of the Council Presidencies resemble pieces to a puzzle. Taken together, these different fora of debate reveal the bigger picture: namely, which topics are of importance to a transnational European public and how the public is discussing them. Democratic participation – especially of the youth – through the creation of a variety of frameworks for deliberation and embedding them into an institutional context, fosters democratic debate, participation and transfers solutions in a bottom-up process from European citizens to decision-makers.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 65; p. 68; pp. 79-80; p. 83.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 79-80; p. 89.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 50; p. 52.

⁵² Ibid., p. 57.

6. Conclusions & perspectives

The results and experiences of *#EngagEUrCouncil* as presented in this study show that youth empowerment and participation are essential parts to support overall citizen engagement and to improve both democratic legitimacy and trust in EU policy-making.

#EngagEUrCouncil was impactful in engaging young Europeans with the Council Presidency as an institution. The rotating presidency provides a valuable point of departure to discuss forward-thinking EU policies and ideas for the future of the EU with young citizens. As Council Presidencies administer meetings and broker decisions in the EU decision-making process, there is also an opportunity to initiate policy change by pushing initiatives and agendas and communicating European policy to the citizens. While direct youth participation in the drafting process of the Presidency Programmes is less likely to be achieved, bringing young people's perspectives to the attention of Council Presidency representatives and policy-makers at EU and national level can prove fruitful.

As the *YouthIdeas* and also the results of the CoFoE suggest, there is a need for long-term and structural inclusion of youth participation and engagement, rather than it being a “nice to have” addendum to policy-making. A broader public debate on the Council Presidency as an agenda-setting European institution – including perspectives and demands of the youth – can be one building block for a more transparent, democratic Union.

#EngagEUrCouncil highlighted the ability of young European citizens to create, discuss and present realistic, yet ambitious ideas for the future of Europe in relevant policy fields based on an informed debate. It empowered them to present and discuss their ideas and policy recommendations in a professional context.

The analysis of the *YouthIdeas* with regards to the Trio Council Presidency Programmes demonstrates the participants' ability to identify the most pressing problems and issues for the future of the EU and showed their understanding of decision-making and legislative competences at the EU level. The ideas are very clear and concise and call on the European Union to bring about positive change as a global leader, safeguard its democratic values and act comprehensively in order to be resilient in the face of future crises. In terms of the proposals that resulted from the CoFoE deliberation process, the *YouthIdeas* prove that young perspectives can provide a much-needed visionary impetus to policy-making. Youth participation can result in highly relevant, innovative and serious future-oriented policy proposals. Therefore, it is valuable to create the opportunities for young people to make their voices heard. In doing so, policy-makers can improve the quality of long-term policy-planning on the European level.

Projects like *#EngagEUrCouncil* can facilitate and incentivise further political engagement and provide young people with a platform to debate, connect and gain knowledge as a prerequisite for participation opportunities in politics and civil society. For projects of this kind to be successful in creating participation and engagement opportunities, this study has highlighted three major lessons learned that are relevant for future youth participation projects and project managers.

First, a broad European network and a guided application process are key for European empowerment projects. To recruit a group of participants that is diverse in categories such as nationality, gender identity or education, close cooperation between European project partners is essential. Structurally embedding the participation in projects like *#EngagEUrCouncil* into existing youth organisations or school curricula as well as a guided application process can help to reach a diverse group of participants.

Second, continuous evaluation as a foundation for adjustments of the project is of great importance. It is helpful to continuously include data and feedback from participants to help identify areas for improvement. This takes participants needs seriously and gives them a voice already at the project implementation level. Successful virtual implementation is facilitated by online tools such as common platforms and workspaces that allow for debate and sharing of information. Based on the participants' desire to get to know their peers better, extra effort is advised in creating and facilitating social connections and group bonds.

Finally, a third lessons learned was the need for a relevant platform where young citizens can discuss and present their ideas. They should be given the opportunity to interact with policy professionals on an equal footing. Providing them with relevant platforms to apply their interest, enhance their knowledge and foster their motivation is key, if youth participation is employed to tackle the EU's democratic deficit.

The collected *YouthIdeas* were published in a brochure that can be requested from IEP. The digital version is available for download [here](#).

Further information on the project and its results can be found on the IEP website: www.iep-berlin.de.

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