

Youth Influence in EU-Policy

Real, symbolic or wishful thinking?



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Abstract

This thesis analyses and evaluates youth participation within the EU and to what extent, and under what conditions the EU's youth participation mechanisms provide young citizens with efficient tools for political influence. To research the link between the mechanisms aimed at their effectiveness, this thesis uses a deliberative democracy framework as well as three dimensions based on Archon Fung's democratic cube: selection, communication and authority. The empirical material consists of interviews, EU official documents, evaluation reports as well as previous research. To whether the mechanisms result in influence, the findings suggest that while the EU has developed tools that have the possibility to provide a pathway for influence, the consultative and advisory roles, become limited by conditions in the ability to fulfill its aim. While elements of deliberation are at times present in dialogue, young people's possibility to influence the agenda as well as result remains low. Overall, this thesis suggests that EU youth participation mechanisms are ineffective in reaching the goal of offering young citizens a platform for influence in the decision-making process, and highlights the connection to mainly result in perceived inclusion.

Key words: EU Youth Participation, EU Youth Dialogue, EU Youth Strategy, President's Youth Advisory Board, Youthwashing, Youth Influence

Words: 19.620

List of Abbreviations

EU	European Union
TFEU	Treaty of the functioning of the European union
DDT	Deliberative Democracy Theory
QCA	Qualitative Content Analysis

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1 Introduction

For several decades, the democratic legitimacy of the European Union (EU) has been a debated topic by both scholars as well as in the political debates. Previous literature has during the past years continued to raise concerns regarding the so-called democratic deficit of the EU. The term has been known to describe the perceived gap between the Union's citizens and their representatives (Kohler-Koch, 2013:12; Deželan, 2023:37). As a response to these concerns the EU institutions have had a goal to strengthen the involvement of civil society in policymaking processes, working against the democratic deficit as well as strengthen the legitimacy of the EU. This development has been described by scholars as a broader change within the Union which has been characterized by participatory democracy (Kohler-Koch, 2013). One group that has gained focus from the European Commission, and more so under the mandate of the commission President Ursula von der Leyen is the young citizens. One example of the shown focus from the Commission is the designation of 2022 as the “European Year of Youth”. The initiative aimed to highlight the role of young Europeans in shaping a greener, more inclusive, and more digital future, and reportedly involved more than 13,000 activities across 27 countries (European Union, N.D a). It is also stated in article 165 (2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), that union action is aimed at, among other things, encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe (European Commission, 2025 C3967)

Despite these efforts, both scholars as well as civil society actors continue to raise concerns regarding the effectiveness of EU youth participation initiatives such as the EU Youth Dialogue. It claims that the issue of low youth engagement in institutional political processes remains a challenge for European democracy. More specifically, that a limited participation not only by youth, but among any group of citizens results in decreased legitimacy in European decision-making (Deželan, 2023:7). However, it is not only the lack of youth representation that has been a growing concern but also what is known by scholars as “*youthwashing*”. It can be described as bringing youth voices into the decision making

process more in order to “check” a box as well as to legitimize the process rather than giving any young participants any real influence (Bowman, 2024;1337-9).

Against this background, it raises the question of how, and if, there is an actual impact of the EU's youth participation mechanisms, especially in the light of the EU's new youth focus. While there have been numerous initiatives aimed to increase the youth participation, such as a new established President's Advisory Board and a more developed EU Youth Dialogue, it still remains unclear to what extent these mechanisms provide meaningful opportunities for political influence. This study therefore seeks to examine to what extent, and under what conditions, the EU's youth participation mechanisms provide young citizens with effective tools for political influence.

1.1 Aim & Relevance

Even if previous research demonstrates that there is a low engagement of youth participation in decision making processes, the EU has throughout the years presented different initiatives with the aim of encouraging youth participation. Today there is a greater lack of research focusing on EU youth participation, at least in terms of the EU youth mechanisms after the implementation of the new EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (Interview, Vociu). For this reason, this study focuses on a chosen mechanism within the strategy (The EU Youth Dialogue), which is described as providing a framework of objectives, principles, priorities, core areas and measures for youth policy cooperation, as well as to offer young citizens a platform where they can raise their perspectives and contribute to the EU decision-making process (Official Journal of the European Union, 2018, C 456/01). Since the EU Youth Dialogue is considered to be a well institutionalized mechanism by many (Lonean and Bradt, 2024:6; Interview, Gardelin), a newer initiative will be included to follow change over time. The so-called ‘Presidents Youth Advisory Board’ introduced by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in the political guidelines 2024-2029 is used for this purpose (European Commission, 2025 C3967). Since previous research related to youth engagement within the EU often relates to areas of citizenship, education, labour or participation through voting or national/local participation and engagement, and not influence in decision-making processes there is a knowledge gap in the effectiveness of these mechanisms. By critically examining the

mechanisms put in place by the EU to increase youth participation, this thesis contributes to the field by evaluating the effectiveness of participation mechanisms in the EU's democratic processes, or if it remains an example of youth washing.

1.2 Objective and Research Questions

This Master's thesis focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of the EU's tools for youth participation, where effectiveness is closely related to both the extent of which results fulfill the EU Youth Strategies aim as well as to which extent the result of political influence is traceable.

For that reason, the primary research question is:

To what extent, and under what conditions do the EU's youth participation mechanisms provide young citizens with efficient tools for political influence?

To explore this, the following questions have been formulated based on the analytical framework following the democratic cube (Fung, 2006), which will be introduced in chapter 3:

Who has access to participation?

How do the participants communicate?

To what extent do the participants have influence?

1.3 Disposition

After the sections above which introduces the topic, aim and research question the literature review will be presented, which includes previous research and literature on studies of

democracy and participation regarding the civil society within the EU as well as research regarding youth engagement in decision-making processes. Following this, there are chapters presenting the theoretical as well as analytical framework, and the methodology and operationalisation. The findings of the study are divided both by the coding dimension of participation, communication and authority as well as an ending subchapter of empirical illustration which goes deeper into EU Youth Dialogue cycles 7 and 10. Ending chapters of discussion and conclusion will be used to finalize the thesis.

2 Literature Review

Studies of democracy and participation are far from new, both within the context of the European Union as well as other systems of governance. Scholars of political science, as well as European integration, have in previous studies examined questions regarding how authority is exercised, as well as the representation and inclusion of different groups in decision-making processes. This section will start by providing an overview about the existing literature of participation in the EU, and continue by focusing further on the inclusion of the youth perspective.

Studies on democracy within the Union have throughout the years shifted towards more deliberative and participatory approaches. The field shines light on the structure of decision-making processes related to democracy, legitimacy, and involvement of civil society. Authors, such as Kochler-Koch (2013) who has researched the participatory mechanism of the EU contributed to the field by explaining the connection between civil society and democratic legitimacy. However, the author mainly focuses on critical aspects, which provide conclusions that become highly relevant in evaluating the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms. The critique mainly relates to the extent to which civil society has managed to have a true effect on decision making processes. It finds that civil society actors often participate in consultative matters, limiting the extent to which they actually create influence even if there is a political promise for more. Despite the consultations, there is shown to be limited effect on the gap of interest representation, gap between representatives and citizens, as well as public awareness of the EU (Kohler-Koch, 2013:173-191) Another example of this is research on participatory mechanisms in the EU conducted by Lindgren and Persson (2011), where the scholars come to the conclusion that even if the involvement of a variation of stakeholders is needed to increase legitimacy and the effectiveness of democracy, the system does not ensure representation for all. This is based on the uncertainty of equal access alongside the incertitude of participants to influence the decision-making process (Lindgren and Persson, 2011:125-135). The conclusion that the system is exclusive, creates a need to explore which youth, as a group as well as individuals, has access to the EU participatory processes. In the more legal aspect of the European decision-making process, some scholars argue that formal

recognition of participation does not automatically translate into influence, but also that the institution's agenda to use participation in order to legitimize political processes should not be underestimated (Kutay, 2015:814-8). This further strengthens the assumption that participation does not equal influence. All together, in the aspect of EU participatory mechanism, these studies show that there has been a proven limitation of participatory democracy in the decision making system. It highlights scholars' concerns for the relation between participation and actual influence.

However, even if participation, civil society, and legitimacy is to an extent a well researched topic, the youth dimension remains lacking in the literature (Interview, Voicu). The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 as well as the EU Youth Dialogue have previously been researched by scholars and have set out examples of the effectiveness of the union's participatory mechanisms. Although, most studies relating to youth participation relates to the youth framework pre 2019. The initiatives have been found by scholars to be efforts to boost participation, increase democratic inclusion, and make EU policy more attractive to younger generations in relation to the lack of willingness among youth to participate. However, the scholars found the mechanisms, such as the structured dialogue (EU Youth Dialogue pre 2019), to be mainly noninfluential and ineffective in leading to policy results (Banjac, 2017:482-4). In later years the research regarding the EU mechanisms for youth participation, more specifically the European Youth Strategy, has been focused around explaining youth participation in terms of youths willingness to engage. One of the scholars, Kitanova's (2020) main findings was that youth political disengagement continues to be a major issue. However, it remains a larger issue in new democracies. In Kitanova's findings, she states that while socio-demographic factors are important, context matters more (Kitanova, 2020:832). This remains an important aspect in applying the analytical framework of the democratic cube in this study. Since a part of the research is to identify the participant and analyse the degree of representation it becomes important to highlight the struggles in less mature democracies. Another important aspect when it comes to research regarding youth representation in the EU is that there is greater problematisation of dialogue with unorganized youth. Pušnik and Banjac (2023), who studied youth participation, found that inclusion of unorganized youth is a persisting problem. They criticized the system as not being open to all, but instead mainly professionalized youth organisations, which increases the concern about how aligned the youth voices are within the decision making (Pušnik and Banjac, 2023:1194-6) .

In 2024 the *Review of the nine cycles of the Youth Dialogue 2010-2022* was published by the European Commission and the Council of Europe. The aim of the review was to examine the achievement of the EU Youth Dialogue from the start, and evaluate the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, and impact of the dialogue. The review determined that the Youth Dialogue is effective, however it measures effectiveness based on the broad number of youth participating in the dialogue. However, in the review it is stated that not all stakeholders do agree with the effectiveness of the Youth Dialogue. It highlights that there is room for improvement when it comes to transparency of how the participants' input has been used (Lonean and Bradt, 2024:8-15). This review is closely related to the aim of this thesis, in terms that it also evaluates the effectiveness. Data included in the review presented above will be used to support arguments within the thesis. However, this thesis evaluates effectiveness based on how and if participation mechanisms are able to fulfill the aim of the strategy, in addition to its capability to provide opportunities for influence. This opens up for another dimension within the field. No similar research or reviews have been conducted without ties to the institution, which strengthens the relevance for another perspective. Furthermore, the degree to which the youth perspective influences actual policy outcomes remains unexplored, as existing research and literature mainly puts focus on process design rather than participation outcomes.

3 Theoretical Framework

To answer to what extent, and under what conditions the EU's youth participation mechanisms provide young citizens with efficient tools for political influence, this thesis will focus on participation, deliberation and the capacity of these to shape decision-making processes. For clarification, in this thesis participation and democracy is closely tied together, but follow the definition that "*Democracy is not simply about participation in elections and representation through parliament, but also about the participation of multiple actors, such as interest groups, experts, representatives from national representations and individual citizens*" (Cini and Borrogon, 2022:131). Since the aim not only is to examine participation, but also the pathway from contribution to impact, it is also important to clarify that this thesis defines political influence as the capacity to shape policy agendas, deliberative processes, and/or outcomes that go beyond consultation and symbolic inclusion. The definition of political influence becomes a fundamental aspect for examining whether young citizens have the effective means to influence the decision-making process. It is closely tied to the *Deliberative Democracy Theory (DDT)*, which will be used as the main theoretical lens in the discussion. An essential aspect of the DDT is the undertaking that participants, such as ordinary citizens, are neither irrational nor biased without reason. As long as the citizens have access to information, as well as the possibility to reason with different actors, they can reach an informed decision (O'Flynn, 2019:38; Dryzek, 2002:1). DDT is considered a theory of normative character which aims at criticizing institutions that do not reach normative standards. It shines light on the communicative process of opinion and will-formulation that precede voting. One of the key aspects is that a political order has reached legitimacy when its policies can be justified to all those living under its laws (Chambers, 200:307; Dryzek, 2002:1; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6). A deliberative democracy stands closely to participatory democracy in that it refers to the importance of involvement of citizens in policy-making processes (Cini and Borrogon, 2022:474; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6). However, an important aspect of the DDT is that deliberation could take form in different types of decision-making, such as deliberation by elected representatives (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6). However, the aspect of deliberation still becomes of importance within the aims of the mechanisms analysed in this thesis, since such mechanisms are described to

offer young citizens a platform where they can raise their perspectives and contribute to the EU decision-making process (Official Journal of the European Union, 2018, C 456/01).

3.1 The Democracy Cube

Closely related to DDT as well as the shared aspect of how participation should be included in democracy is Archon Fung's (2006) analytical framework “the democracy cube”, which can be seen as a way to theoretically and empirically measure the participation in decision-making processes. It consists of three dimensions, and focuses on three different questions: who participates, how do participants communicate with each other, and how are what they communicate linked with policy or public action. By following these three dimensions, it allows for examination of young citizens' political influence, and as a consequence of that, evaluation of how the influence is affected by the opportunity to shape policy agendas, the deliberative processes and if the outcomes only offer perceived influence (Fung, 2006: 67-70).

3.1.1 Who participates?

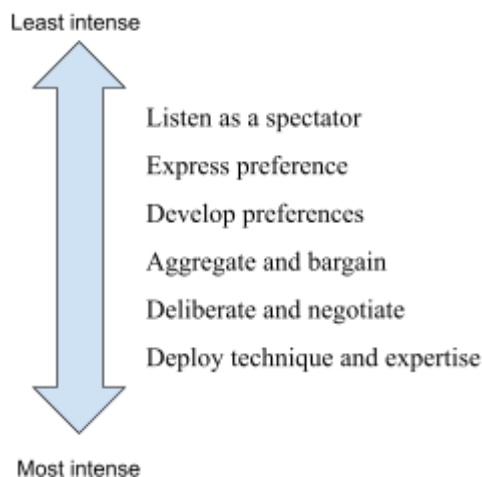
The first analytical dimension of Fung's democratic cube questions who is allowed access to participate in the policymaking processes. According to Fung there are several different instruments to select participants, such as: *self-selected*, *selectivity recruitment*, *randomly selecting*, *lay stakeholders*, *professional stakeholders*, *elected representatives* and *expert administrators*. This dimension is crucial for assessing the conditions under which youth influence functions in the decision-making process. If participation is limited to organized elites, the mechanism is considered more exclusive while it gets more inclusive the more accessible it is to the public. A more representative selection might strengthen the democratic legitimacy and increase the likelihood that the participation mechanisms allow for diverse youth interests (Fung, 2006: 67-70). For this thesis, this dimension helps determine whether the mechanisms can be considered effective in terms of a greater inclusion of representation of the youth perspective, or if the mechanisms mainly allow for exclusive participation.

3.1.2 How do participants communicate?

The second dimension relates to the interaction between participants, and allows for evaluating if young participants are involved in the agenda setting of decisions or only responding to predefined institutional priorities. By analyzing how the participant

communicates with each other as well as with the institutional actors, this thesis researches the effectiveness of the mechanisms as well as the “real” influence of youth participation in the EU decision making process. The analysis will reference Fung's six modes of communication and decision-making to evaluate the degree of influential communication. The modes of participation range from least to most intense/influential. Consultation (*express preference*) is not necessarily non-deliberative, however, according to the dimensions of the democratic cube it is considered to be less intense. Expressing preferences is argued to be missing deliberative elements which are considered in both *aggregate and bargain*, where participants usually know what they want but are eager to find the best alternative to advance joint references, as well as *deliberate and negotiate*, where participants want to figure out a joint opinion through reason, arguments, and principles. The term negotiating relates to the idea of consensus-building in this aspect (Fung, 2006: 68-69).

Figure 1. Modes of Communication and Decision.



3.1.3 *How is what participants say linked to what public authorities or participants themselves do?*

The third dimension of the democracy cube is used in this thesis to research to what extent youth participants can influence the decision making process. Fung (2006) implies within his democracy cube, that for a process to be considered as participatory, the participants should engage in communication, which could have either more or less influence depending on the authority. This relates to the DDT lens, as both frameworks highlight the importance of communication in democratic processes (O'Flynn, 2019:38; Dryzek, 2002:1). For this reason, it is necessary to research whether the participants have authority to impact on the decision

making processes through one or more of the following: *personal benefits, communicating influence, advice and consultation, co-governance, direct authority* (Fung, 2006:69). Since youth actors are not part of the legislative institutions, co-governance and direct authority are not relevant for this study. This thesis mainly focuses on the first three stages of authority. Especially *communicative influence*, where officials are emotionally affected by participants' conclusions (personal willingness), and *advice and consultation* which relates to officials' commitment to receiving input from participants. These dimensions are of fundamental value for this study to answer whether the youth participation in EU-decision making processes are mainly symbolic or comes from/ results in real influence. According to Fung, there is variation between participation mechanisms in how they come to relate to political action or policy; this could imply that mechanisms that lack high levels of authority could risk becoming primarily symbolic (Fung, 2006:69).

In this thesis, deliberative democracy is operationalized through Fung's framework. The democratic cube is used as an analytical lens to examine political influence, and young citizens' effect on the outcome of decision-making processes through mechanisms such as the EU Youth Strategy and the President's Youth Advisory Board. By applying Fung's framework, this thesis is able to assess whether the EU's mechanism for young participation results in political influence, or rather works as an instrument of institutional legitimation. The theoretical as well as analytical framework is used to code the material by the different dimensions, however the case of participation within the institutional process remains in focus. It allows for better evaluation of the degree of political influence, focusing on important aspects of the mechanisms to evaluate the effect on European institutional decision-making as well as democratic processes.

3.2 Theoretical Limitations

There are different variations of democracy theories besides DDT that focus on other aspects, such as minimal democracy as well as deeper aspects of participatory democracy that are not included as a part of the theoretical framework of this study. Minimal democracy also focuses on institutional arrangements for political decision-making processes (O'Flynn, 2019:38-40). However, it frames the purpose of elections and governments not as representatives of citizens, but rather as a tool not to become tyrannical. In contrast to deliberative democracy, it

frames the ordinary citizen both as biased and irrational. Participatory democracy shares many of the key characteristics with deliberative democracy and this thesis includes those aspects in the analysis. However, the theoretical branch of participatory democracy focuses on deep structural change needed to create a fully participatory society where every citizen can make political decisions directly for themselves, both in their everyday life as well as in the broader political system (O'Flynn, 2019:38-40). Since this research aims at examining institutional mechanisms where the youth perspective is mainly presented to policy-makers by youth representatives, such as those nominated from National Youth Councils, this thesis will take on the lens of deliberative democracy.

4 Method & Empirical Material

To conduct the research this thesis will primarily be a qualitative content analysis (QCA), using qualitative methods to collect, as well as interpret data. Using a qualitative method allows for analysing texts and documents, as well as researching from a social perspective how events and patterns unfold over time. This is crucial for this thesis, since the study will review documents and other parts of the European decision-making process (Bryman, 2021:524). The QCA is used because it allows for one's own interpretation of data, in relation to the knowledge of the topic, the situation it is encountered in as well as how we feel about it (Schreider, 2012:11). In the thesis, the QCA methods contribute to systematically examining and describing how EU youth participation mechanisms are structured as well as how, and if, youth participation results in influence within decision-making processes. The method allows for a deductive approach of the theory, which lays the foundation for the coding of empirical findings. To reduce and systematically identify patterns in the data, both using interviews as well as documents, a coding framework has been developed based on Fung's (2006) analytical framework "the democratic cube". It will consist of the three dimensions: participant selection, communication and decision-making, as well as the degree of authority and power. The coding allows thematically to divide, evaluate, and identify key aspects within the data.

4.1 Process-tracing

In addition to QCA, this thesis uses theory-testing process-tracing following the framework used by Beach and Pedersen (2019). While the content analysis allows for mapping the institutional design and structures, process-tracing allows for analysing the link between cause and outcome, such as events, decisions, and actions. It contributes to the research by answering how and to what extent mechanisms lead to youth influence on agenda-setting and policy outcomes (Beach and Pedersen, 2019:192-5; Geroge and Bennet, 2005:224, 231). The thesis aims to establish the causal processes through which political influence can occur by explaining and examining the series of events that potentially results in political influence for young citizens (Beach and Pedersen, 2019:193). The purpose of process-tracing in this thesis

is not to assume that youth participation and engagement automatically results in policy influence. Rather, the outcome against which the mechanisms are tested remains empirically open prior to the conduct of the study. The purpose is instead to assess whether the causal mechanism connecting institutionalized participation to policy influence can be empirically observed (Beach and Pedersen, 2019:192-5). Even in the absence of a known outcome prior to the study, process-tracing remains a suitable option, as it enables a systematic evaluation of whether the mechanisms produce observable effects. Namely, the potential influence of EU youth participation mechanisms on policy processes.

More specifically this thesis employs a minimalist theory-testing variant of process-tracing, following the ideas/concept of Beach and Pedersen (2019). The reason for this is the limited access to information regarding internal decision-making processes as well as the aim to focus on examining key observable implications linking youth participation to policy influence. A minimalist theory-testing process-tracing is commonly used when the knowledge about the link between cause and outcome as well as the conditions are unknown (Beach, Pedersen, 2019: 193-5), which is suitable for this case since the thesis aims to examine the observable effects of the mechanisms.

4.2 Data-selection

Empirical material used in this thesis will consist of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of data gathered from qualitative and semi-structured interviews with officials at EU institutions, national governments, and representatives of National Youth Councils as it is needed to identify patterns not available in official documents. These patterns include informal institutional structures as well as individual experiences (Gerson, 2020:6). To analyse, and confirm the data, secondary sources will also be used, and will mainly consist of previous research and literature both regarding civil society and youth influence in the EU decision-making processes. The secondary data contributes to the overall understanding of the results and are used to confirm to what extent and under conditions the EU's youth participant mechanisms provide young citizens with efficient tools for influence.

4.3 Semi-structured interviews

A majority of the data have been collected through semi-structured interviews, and have provided perspectives both from youth and senior professionals with knowledge of the European decision-making process. While all questions were based on the analytical dimensions from the democratic cube, such as participation, communication and authority, the questions were adapted to reflect the role of each respondent. The respondents mainly answered the pre-defined questions, but were able to both elaborate and add aspects which they felt were of high importance in order to evaluate youth influence in the European decision-making process (Gerson, 2020:2). This included both advice on limitations of research as well as aspects that could have been missed during the interview. For respondents who mainly contributed with a youth perspective, such as national youth representatives, the questions were primarily focused on how youth influence is perceived. However, questions asked to institutional professionals included more questions about how youth recommendations are processed and potentially integrated within policy discussions. Based on the respondents answer to the questions, the following questions could be re-formulated to gather more information and to be better suited for the dialogue.

To construct the interview guide on the analytical framework was crucial in gathering data to analyse. It allowed for a better understanding of how and if participants could be seen as representative more than just based on criteria, but rather on expression of opinions and engagement which relates to who participates as well as how participants communicate (Figure 1). Regarding the third dimension, authority was used to evaluate to which extent the decision-making processes are affected by the EU youth mechanisms. It allowed respondents to elaborate on both if or if not there are concrete examples of cases of influence such as policy decisions and if the influence has been more consultative / other type of authority. The interviews made it possible to gather data on parts of the decision-making processes that are not possible to get through institutional documents.

To decide on who takes part as a respondent in the interview, purpose sampling has been used. Purposive sampling allows to sample both cases and participants in a strategic manner, and participants were chosen based on which kind of information they could provide (Bryman, 2021: 1236-7). The method has been chosen to ensure that the respondents have the right kind of experience to answer the questions as well as contribute with unique data. They have been selected based on their different characteristics, which in this case represents their different

professional positions. In order to be considered a respondent, the individual must have worked/ or is working within the area of youth influence in the EU. This also includes voluntary work. To allow for geographically dispersed samples, such as Brussels and Stockholm, videocall interviewing was used with a digital AI-transcription tool. However, the AI-transcription tool did have difficulties in picking up different Swedish accents in particular. This created issues with the accuracy of the transcription, which later had to be re-transcribed. A majority of the interviews were held in Swedish, and has been translated into English to raise the validity of the research. In the appendix it is possible to review the interview guide, since the transcription was mainly used for coding purposes.

4.4 Discussion of Sources

To be able to answer and conduct data on whether the EU youth participation mechanisms results in influence there was a need to include a variety of sources, such as official documents, website information, interviews, in addition to academic sources as described further up in the methodology section. The official documents, from the EU Commission, Council recommendations and reports from the EU Youth Dialogue for example, strengthens the validity of the data. It contributes with a connection from input to policy, alongside that it offers a picture of how the system is supposed to work. However, with these documents there is a risk of "positive bias", where the reports cover how it is supposed to work and not how it worked in reality. In this aspect, the interviews became fundamental since they were able to contribute with insights into how the system actually works, however, the limitation of interviews risks building up an elite narrative. By including more secondary data such as the previous research, statements from the interview were able to be strengthened, and was used as an effort to close the gap from a smaller number of interviews.

4.5 Operationalisation

Table 1 presents the coding framework, which is based on the three dimensions of participation, communication and authority. The operational definitions are based on the author's descriptions of the different dimensions of the democracy cube (Fung, 2006). While the empirical indicators are built on analysis of the democratic cube and its dimensions.

Table 1. Operationalisation of analytical framework *Source: Fung (2006)*

The Democracy Cube	Analytical Focus	Operational Definition	Empirical Indicators
Participation Selection	Who participates and under what access conditions	The degree of openness, inclusiveness and representational structure of EU Youth Mechanism	Selection procedures Eligibility criteria Organisational mediation Representation diversity Barriers to access
Communication & Decision Mode	How interactions between youth and institutions are structured	The extent to which participation is consultative or deliberative	Agenda setting capacity Dialogue structure Frequency of interaction Evidence of reciprocal exchange
Authority	The degree of influence attached to youth input	The formal and practical capacity of youth contributions to affect policy processes	Obligation to respond Follow-up mechanisms Textual incorporation of recommendations

4.6 Limitations & Delimitations

One of the challenges for conducting this research was the ability to interview a greater number of youth participants. This was mainly because of the change of youth representatives, coming close to the end of the current dialogue cycle. Many of the email-accounts were for that reason inactive. Another challenge was to reach a geographical diversity between the respondents, which ultimately resulted in 3 out of 4 respondents being Swedish citizens. With this, there is a risk of the collected data from the interview not being representative. Besides this, the limitation to trace how the recommendations from the EU

Youth Dialogue is used in policy work makes it difficult to get a correct picture on how input actually leads to influence. However, the interviews with officials (both EU and national) as well as elected representatives are meant to close this knowledge gap.

Throughout the collection of data there were chosen delimitations made. Among these is that this thesis only focuses on policy and influence on the EU level, despite that youth policy is a national competence. Even if this is the case, this thesis does not include national implementation. The EU Youth Strategy does also include more mechanisms than are highlighted in this study, however, to be able to make a generalization the most institutionalized one together with one of the newer initiatives has been chosen. Cases which are presented under Empirical illustrations only included the cycles of 7 and 10 within the EU Youth Dialogue, following that these are the first as well as last finished ones within the current EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. These are meant to represent clear changes over time instead of following a year to year illustration.

5 Presentation of Research Findings

5.1 EU Mechanisms for participation - an overview of tools

This following section will provide an overview of the different EU mechanisms for participation to give an understanding of the tools. It will highlight the tools main purposes and how they function. The section lays the foundation for the evaluation of the mechanisms based on the coding framework of the democratic cube.

5.1.1 EU Youth Strategy

The European Union's current framework for cooperation regarding youth participation is the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. Among other things, the strategy aims to address the main challenges young people face in Europe today, increase youth policy cooperation, enable that youth policy is mainstreamed across policy areas, in addition to promoting active citizenships, social inclusion and participation in democratic life (Official Journal of the European Union, C 456, 2018). The strategy especially focuses on the following:

- Meaningful participation (not symbolic)
- Ability to influence all stages of policy making (agenda-setting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation)
- Inclusive participation

The EU Youth Strategy follows a three year cycle, with a workplan constructed by the trio-presidency in collaboration with the European Commission. The 11 European Youth Goals, which were decided during the 6th cycle of the Youth Dialogue, are the very foundation of the strategy, and sets out the thematic priorities of both the workplan as well as participation mechanisms within such as the European Youth Dialogue (European Youth Portal, N.D a; Lonean and Bradt, 2024:21).

Figure 2. European Youth Goals *Source: Official Journal of the European Union, C 456, 2018*

1	Connecting EU with Youth	7	Quality Employment for all
2	Equality of all genders	8	Quality Learning
3	Inclusive societies	9	Space & Participation for all
4	Information & Constrictive Dialogue	10	Sustainable Green Europe
5	Mental Health & Wellbeing	11	Youth organisations & European Programmes
6	Moving Rural Youth Forward		

The EU Youth Dialogue aims towards giving young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, a platform to which they influence policy. It is mainly constructed as a consultation process with the purpose of collecting input from youths throughout the member states, which is later discussed and formulated into recommendations at three conferences attended by two youth representatives from each member state. Each dialog cycle (18 months) results in a recommendation document formulated and submitted to the Council as well as the Commission (Youth Goals Lab, 2020:7; MUCF, N.D). The dialogue cycle is co-ordinated at EU level by the European Steering Group, which consist of the representatives from the trio-presidencies, the Council of the EU, the European Commission and the European Youth Forum (Lonean and Bradt, 2024:13). The European Youth Forum represents the collected voice of youths as it is the biggest platform of youth organisations in Europe (European Youth Forum, N.D a). It is the European Steering Group that provides guidelines and methodology to use during the consultation process, which is managed by the National Working Groups (Lonean, Brandt, 2024:13). The National Working Groups also consist of representatives from the ministry in each member state that is responsible for youth related policies, the National Youth Councils and youth organisations (Youth Goals Lab, 2020:5).

As mentioned, the EU Youth Dialogue cycle is based on the Youth Goals which in itself is a result from the dialogues 6th cycle (European Youth Portal, N.D a). The respondents in the conducted interviews described the Youth Goals as the main tool for allowing youth

participants to be a part of the agenda-setting process within the dialogue structure (Interview, Gardelin, Kari., Eriksson, Sigge., Lindholm., Anders). For this reason it becomes of importance to question whether the Youth Dialogue actually is an effective tool for ensuring youth influence in the first place in terms of participation, communication- and decision making mode as well as to which extent they have authority over decisions. This could determine which role the young participants actually have had in the agenda-setting process in the first place.

5. 1. 2 Presidents Youth Advisory Board

A new initiative from the Commission is the President's "Youth Advisory Board", an initiative mentioned by the Commission President already in the Political Guidelines 2024-2029, which is set out by the Council (European Union , N.D b). Its purpose is to *"advise the president on current issues that matter the most to young people, share their perspectives on policies developed by the Commission, and put young people at heart of decision making"* (European Commission, N.D). The Advisory Board consists of one representative from each member state, one from the European Youth Forum as well as observers from candidate countries and potential candidates for EU accession. The youth representatives are supposed to bring perspective to the issues that young people are facing, which includes giving feedback on existing and proposed EU policies and strategies, and contribute to shaping the Commission's political priorities. The aim is to ensure two-way communication between the institution and young people in political processes (European Commission, N.D).

5.2 Dimension 1 - Who has access to participation?

This chapter presents the empirical findings in order to evaluate to what extent, and under what conditions the EU youth participation mechanisms provide young citizens with opportunities for political influence. The findings are structured according to the three analytical dimensions from the *"democratic cube"*, participation selection, communication and decision mode, and authority. Answering the questions of who has access to participation, how do they influence, and to what extent. This first section evaluates the participation selection for the EU Youth Dialogue as well as the President's Advisory Board, The findings

highlight that access to participation is structured by organisational characteristics and shaped by institutional procedures which indicates barriers to participation.

5. 2. 1 Organisationally mediated participation - who participates?

The findings indicate that the possibility to participate in the EU youth mechanisms for participation is mediated primarily through organized civil society structures. All the respondents of the interviews (Interviews, Eriksson., Gardelin., Lindholm., Voicu) emphasized that the role of umbrella organisations are well integrated into the EU structures, and have a key role in participation both in the EU Youth Dialogue as well as in the President's Advisory Board.

In most member states it is the National Youth Council that is responsible for the selection process for participatory and representational positions, especially within the EU Youth Dialogue (Interview, Gardelin; Lonean and Bradt, 2024:21,26). One example of how this process is structured is in Sweden, where the National Youth Council (LSU) has a formally recognized role (Interview, Eriksson). It is tasked with selecting two representatives, and to be considered as a candidate, the person needs to be a member of one of the LSU member organisations (LSU, N.D; MUCF, N.D). In principle, neither the EU institutions nor the national ministries should have any direct influence over the selection processes (Interview, Eriksson., Gardelin). However, the findings do suggest that this is not the case in all member states.

“In some member states such as Hungary, governments have had greater control over the selection process” Sigge Eriksson, President of the Swedish National Council for Youth Organisations

“The commission actively encourages the process to be youth-led, but the responsibility formally lies with the Member State as youth policy primarily is a national area of competence” Kari Gardelin, Policy Officer, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture.

This suggests that even if member states are encouraged by the Commission to have the National Youth Councils be responsible for the nomination and selection processes (Interview, Gardelin., Eriksson), it is not secured through the EU Youth Strategy or its tools. That

member states have the opportunity to control which youth voices are represented through participation mechanisms could be an indication that access to participation is conditional. Instead of ensuring open access in the form of participation of the individual, does it rely upon organisational affiliations (LSU, N.D). By comparing the Youth Dialogue with the President's Youth Advisory Board it is possible to see that two different mechanisms for participation both seem to be relying on the organisational, and to some extent institutionalized affiliation, even if they are constructed in different ways. While the Youth Dialogue is the most established mechanism for youth participation, and well integrated into the EU Youth Strategy, the President's Advisory Board is relatively new and does not share the same institutionalized structure (Interview, Gardelin). Similar to the Youth Dialogue it is in most cases the Youth Councils that nominate candidates for the Advisory Board, which is why it is possible to identify a participation access that relies on the organisational structure of civil society organisations (Interview, Eriksson). However, in the selection process for the Advisory Board the Commission is responsible for the final selections of the nominees (Interview, Eriksson). This can be interpreted as a very limited access to participation controlled by institutional structures, as it only allows for a small number of youth to participate.

The organisational umbrella structure of civil society organisations plays a greater role in dictating on which youth has access to participation, and goes further than just National Youth Councils. EU-level organisations are also found to be part of the participation processes. The findings highlight the central role of the European Youth Forum, the biggest platform for youth organisations in Europe and functions as a key intermediary between youth actors and EU institutions (European Youth Forum, N.D a). The European Youth Forum is described as having a unique and strong position in relation to the implementation of EU youth policy and maintains close cooperation with the European Commission and the Council's youth policy structures (Interview, Lindholm). In their role, they are the *“voice of young people in Europe, representing both National Youth Councils and International Non-Government Youth Organisations”* (European Youth Forum, N.D a). This continues to be an indication that the organized representation remains strong rather than open to all through more than one EU tool for participation, both those more institutionally structured as well as newer initiatives. It also suggests that there are signs of elite mediation in the selection for participation within the EU, as the final selections to the EU Advisory Board are made by the Commission as well as the

overall nomination processes (Interview, Eriksson). In the cases of the EU Youth Strategy as well as the Advisory Board the findings suggest that participation appears to rely heavily on the umbrella structure of youth organisations, both on national and the EU-level (Interviews, Eriksson., Lindholm., Voicu). While this model has the potential to ensure geographical representation across all the EU member states (Interview, Lindholm; Lonean and Bradt, 2024:26), it could be a potential risk for the justifiability of the policy-making by connecting participation through membership rather than a more open participation process since it becomes less accessible (Fung, 2006:67-68,70),

Another important aspect that also indicates the relations between participation and the institutionalized structure is the role of the trio-presidency (Interview, Lindholm). As mentioned, it is the trio-presidency that plays a central role in the work cycle of the EU Youth Strategy, as highlighted in all interviews conducted for this study (Interviews, Eriksson., Gardelin., Lindholm., Voicu; Lonean and Bradt, 2024:21). However, the indications towards an institutionalized process does not take away from the influence of organisational umbrella structures, since National Youth Councils from the presiding member state often play a more prominent role in the organisation and implementation of strategy as well as dialogue activities (Interviews, Eriksson., Lindholm). This indicates the access to participation is driven by organisational and institutional structures and processes.

5. 2. 2 Who do they represent?

The findings shows that even if participation in the EU youth mechanisms is primarily based on organisational participation rather than open/individual participation it remains representative. The youth organisations often play a key role of representing a broader group of young people, both on the national level through the National Councils such as LSU in Sweden, but also through the umbrella organisation the European Youth Forum (Interviews, Eriksson., Gardelin., Lindholm) This structure enables a type of indirect representation across member states. However, the finding indicates that this does not necessarily have any negative impact on the representation of minority groups as minorities tend to be overly represented within the participation tools (Interview, Gardelin; Lonean and Bradt, 2024:8)

“Statistics that are collected by the Commission show the background of participants, and several minority groups, such as ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities and young people with disabilities are on average overrepresented in the dialogue process” Gardelin

Although, there are still groups that are underrepresented within the EU's tools for participation, such as young people in rural areas as well as young people that are not in employment, education or training. Socio-economic representation remains difficult to measure, as the concept is difficult to define and compare across member states (Interview, Gardelin). However, as pointed out by previous research even though socio-demographic factors remain important for political engagement / disengagement, there are other factors such as context and the level of democracy in the country that matters more (Kitanova, 2020:832). Overall, based on the data it can be interpreted that even if the system shows tendencies towards being elite-based and affected by organisational and institutional structures, it does allow for a greater representation of perspectives.

5. 2. 3 Barriers to access

Several respondents highlighted the existence of barriers to access that affect who is able to participate as well as the representational factor of the youth perspective.

“Participation often relies on voluntary engagement which requires both time and resources, for this reason there is a high turn-over rate among young participants which affect continuity” Rares Voicu, President, European Youth Forum

This introduces a structural barrier to access and contributes to high turnover, affecting continuity in participation. In addition *“certain participants possess greater familiarity with the EU policy making processes and may therefore dominate during the dialogues”* (Interview, Lindholm), which makes it possible for certain participants to dominate discussions. To clarify, just because you are in the groups of participants, does not mean that everyone is participating with the same influence since some perspectives are “louder” than others. Some may only be in the room, while others express their preferences. This indicates that the system as it is today has knowledge based barriers to participation. Where a meaningful participation is conditioned by institutional familiarity, policy literacy and organisational experience (Interview, Lindholm). Not only does it show that there are

informal conditions to participation, but also that previous knowledge can influence whose voices engage more effectively as well as dominate the discussions.

As highlighted by scholars, youth engagement and civil society structures tend to be elite-based characteristics affecting the engagement within EU participatory mechanisms. There continues to be a distinction between organized and unorganized youth within the institutional processes where the involvement of unorganized youth has long been one of the key problems within participation, and makes participation dependent on organisational affiliation (Pušnik and Banjac, 2023). The pattern of this distinction is also reflected in the findings of this study, as one of the respondents noted that groups that are not in employment, education or training tend to be underrepresented within the participation mechanisms (Interview, Gardelin). While this has been discussed as a representational issue in the previous section, it also constitutes a barrier to access since participation mechanisms seem to be more available, easier to take part of, or more meaningful for those already embedded in organisational structures. It can be suggested that access to participation is not equal for all, but instead conditioned by organisational structures which link the subdimensions of access and representation closely together.

5. 3 Dimension 2 - How do the participants communicate?

This section analyses and evaluates how communication between youth participants and EU institutions is structured and which type of decision-making mode it result in, that being, listen as a spectator, express preferences, develop preferences, aggregate and bargain, deliberate and negotiate as well as deploy technique and expertise (Fung, 2006:68-69). The chapter will highlight that the structure of the participation mechanisms results in a consultative participatory process with an interaction that is mainly institutionalized, alongside that participants mainly express and develop their preferences rather than being allowed to deliberate.

5. 3. 1 The consultative structure of participation

The findings indicate that communication within the EU youth participation mechanisms is primarily structured as consultations where the participants express and develop their preferences, rather than participating in a deliberative manner characterized by a two-way communication. In the collection of data, the dialogue and interaction between youth participants and policy-makers were often described as consultative, both in the way the dialogue was structured but also by the mission description (Interview, Eriksson., Gardelin). Suggesting that young people may contribute with their perspectives and input, but that elements of negotiation and deliberation would be missing. This could be interpreted as that influence in decision-making processes that goes beyond consultative matter remains low.

During the interviews, deliberative elements (which will be discussed further in section 5.3.2) were identified (Interview, Eriksson). The findings suggest that young participants are able to elaborate on their perspective regarding different policy issues while interacting. Examples of this were visible both in the EU Youth Dialogue as well as the President's Youth Advisory Board. The structure behind how these perspectives are either gathered or expressed varies depending on the participation tool (Interview, Eriksson., Gardelin). However, they do have in common that lifted perspectives and voiced opinions often are gathered through a structured process at both national and European levels through the different umbrella organisations, such as national councils and the European Youth Forum (Interview, Eriksson., Gardelin, Lindholm, Voicu; MUCF, N.D). In the Youth Dialogue, material to the EU Youth Conferences are collected through consultation both on national and European level. It is mainly done through workshops and surveys, but also through dialogue events and conferences (MUCF, N.D). Focusing on the EU Youth Dialogue, the information from the consultations are lifted at the EU Youth Conference, which later are discussed in the conference's working groups. At the Youth Dialogue cycle's final stage, the results from the consultations and conferences are formulated into recommendations and thereafter presented to the Council as well as the Commission (Interview, Lindholm; Lonean and Bradt, 2024:26). Policy officers at the institutions are then provided with the recommendations that are relevant for their working area (Interview, Gardelin., Lindholm). This indicates that raised perspectives are compiled and eventually reaches the EU institutions, which could indicate a higher influential communication and decision mode, since it has the possibility to inform and influence policy discussions. However, the structure puts limits on the influence to where it is bound to only expressing and developing preferences rather than allowing for participation in negotiation

processes. The format as it is today emphasizes on expression rather than a two-way communication, without strong deliberative elements.

As highlighted in the interview with Gardelin *“The EU Youth Dialogue is designed to provide young people with the opportunity to contribute perspectives to political processes”*. Gardelin continues by describing the process as a *“collection of input in the member states”*, which is passed on to the EU level through institutional channels. The input is later integrated into the EU’s governing documents, which she claims to provide for a relatively clear process for how input from young people should be passed on within the institutions. However, the findings suggest that the Youth Dialogue follows a more structured and institutional process in collecting youth perspectives and translating them into policy recommendations compared to the President’s Advisory Board that operates in a more informal and less clearly defined manner (Interview, Eriksson., Gardelin).

“The new Advisory Board linked to the Commission President works differently. It is a personal initiative from the Commission President and is therefore not as clearly integrated into institutional structures. It does not yet have an established procedure [...] this means that the form of communication in practise varies between mechanisms” Gardelin

Despite the differences, both mechanisms rely on the young participants' perspectives in structured and institutionalized consultations rather than taking part as co-creator of policy. Which could be described by their role in mainly expressing preferences, rather than deliberating.

“The mission for the President’s Youth Advisory Board is clearly consultative, and for youth participants to consult is the reason for the Commission President to initiate the meeting”
Eriksson

During the Advisory Board meetings, the youth representatives give speeches but are also asked to send memos (Interview, Eriksson). This indicates that youth participants have the opportunity to express and develop their preferences. However, based on the fact that there are very few indicators on negotiation or a two-way communication, it is difficult to identify deliberative elements in terms of collectively coming to a decision or joint preference. The lack of deliberation in both participation mechanisms as well as the indicators on their focus

on mainly expressing preferences makes it possible to interpret the EU's structure for youth participation to be institutionalized in a way that mainly allows for youth participation in a consultative manner.

5. 3. 2 Deliberative elements with institutional constraints

While the EU Youth Dialogue and the President's Advisory Board is structured as consultation in its way of collecting input as well as with its described aim, there are still indicators of deliberative interaction between participants and institutional actors (Interview, Eriksson; European Commission, N.D; MUCF, N.D). It is possible to identify deliberative elements when participants have the opportunity to discuss, exchange and develop their ideas. However, even if these deliberative elements are visible within the participation mechanisms as it introduces a two-way communication, there continue to be limitations towards the deliberation.

Deliberation, in this context, does not only imply that there has been a change of ideas but has instead focused on identifying if there has been a possibility for participants to influence direction and outcomes of the discussions based on those ideas. As described by Eriksson, participatory interactions within the Advisory Board included deliberative elements such as the opportunity to speak freely, follow-up questions from both youth and officials which built up a narrative of genuine exchange. However, even if these interactions could be indicators of deliberation, they remain constrained by institutional structures as participants lack control over the agenda. The Commission sets the agenda for the meetings based on their priorities, and for that reason has the most influence on what is discussed and allowed for deliberation (Interview, Eriksson). However, because of the perception of genuine exchange, the interactions were not perceived as purely symbolic but rather as involving a degree of mutual engagement. This indication of deliberative elements takes place within an institutionally defined framework where key aspects such as agenda-setting, format and scope are institutionalized. Eriksson's experience of the Advisory Board meetings indicates that the extent to which youth plays a greater role in deliberation exists, but is limited because of the low influence over structures. Consequently, the degree varies across different participation mechanisms.

Elements of deliberation within the EU Youth Dialogue will be further analysed within the

section of Empirical illustration (5.5), since the illustrations present the Youth Dialogue cycles 7 and 10.

5. 3. 3 Agenda-setting Capacity

The findings show that while young people participate in the EU’s participatory mechanisms and express and develop their preference within the decision-making processes, the agenda-setting power remains institutionalized. Participation through the EU Youth Dialogue as well as the Advisory Board allow youths to participate in consultations, but the thematic focus of the consultations are pre-defined (Interview, Eriksson, Gardelin). Although, there is possibility for youth participants to influence the strategic work of the EU Youth Strategy since the strategy is based on the EU Youth Goals (Interview, Gardelin; Lonean and Brandt, 2024:21), the findings suggest that this influence is limited and occurs within predefined frameworks.

The formal agenda-setting takes place in steering groups linked to the presidencies (Interview, Lindholm). There is thus a potential, but limited, agenda-setting capacity for youth to influence. It is the trio-presidency that are responsible for the thematic priorities of the cycle and chooses one or more of the EU Youth Goals to construct their work plan by (Lonean and Brandt, 2024:21). Since the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy it has been the following:

Table 2. EU Youth Dialogue Cycles *Source: European Youth Portal, N.D B*

Trio-presidency	Cycle	Youth Goals
Romania, Finland, Croatia	7th	#7 Quality employment for all, #8 Quality learning, #6 Moving rural youth forward
Germany, Portugal, Slovenia	8th	#9 Space for democracy and participation
France, Czech Republic, Sweden	9th	#10 Sustainable Green Europe, #3 Inclusive societies
Spain, Belgium, Hungary	10th	#3 Inclusive societies

Poland, Denmark, Cyprus	11th (current)	#1 Connecting EU with youth
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As seen, the focus of the agenda is decided already in the construction of the work plan by the trio which comes to affect the thematic focus on the dialogue and the conferences. However, the National Youth Councils take a greater role within the National Working Groups that are responsible for the consultative process in the Youth Dialogues (Interview, Lindholm: Lonean and Brandt, 2024:21-22). This does not change that participants contribute with input within a pre-constructed framework and cannot determine the agenda, as the structure of the workplan and the Youth Goals makes the nature of the youth participation consultation rather than a high influence opportunity. Since the foundation for the agenda lies within the European Youth Goals, which strongly influences both the EU Youth Strategy as well as its participation tools such as the Youth Dialogue, it can be argued at a first glimpse that this is an indicator of youth influence over the agenda-setting. In a matter of fact, this has been raised during the interviews as an argument on how youth participants influence both agenda and policy (Interviews, Eriksson., Gardelin). However, since the European Youth Goals followed the same consultative process as other recommendations described, as it was the outcome of the 6th cycle of the dialogue (Lonean and Brandt, 2024:21-22), the results of this study becomes relevant in determining if that statement remains true. Previous research highlighted that the EU has historically faced challenges in reaching and including unorganized youth, with participation often exhibiting tendencies towards elite-driven selections (Pušnik and Banjac, 2023:1194-6). Combined with the highly institutionalized nature of agenda-setting within the EU youth participation mechanism, this raises questions about the extent to which the themes and priorities guiding these processes can be considered representative of the broader youth population. Consequently, it becomes relevant to question whether the current participation frameworks genuinely reflect diverse youth perspectives, or whether they primarily reproduce institutionally defined priorities with limited bottom-up influence. In discussions regarding the reasoning behind the agenda-setting, the following perspectives were brought up:

“Issues that young participants wish and tend to discuss are often broad in character. Young participants raise broad societal concerns, while the EU institutions require specific and

policy-relevant recommendations” Anders Lindholm, Former Counsellor Education and Youth, Permanent Representation of Sweden to the EU

“Young people often appreciate when the agenda is set out by the institutions, they find it difficult to know what issues to bring up [...] by having the institutions set out the agenda for consultations it becomes easier to connect the recommendations with relevant policies or to reach active working groups” Gardelin

“The agenda for the Advisory Board meetings is pre-decided by the institution, there has been an expressed interest from the participants to influence the meeting agenda for future meetings” Eriksson

This suggests that the agenda-setting capacity is constrained and institutionalized, and provides a structural asymmetry where institutions set out the framework which the youth participants respond to. The reasoning behind this seems to be that *“youth proposals must fit into predefined policy frameworks to be considered”* (Interview, Lindholm). This continues to add to the overall picture that the possibility for youth to have influence over the decision-making processes is limited and mainly consultative, even if the agenda is based on the European Youth Goals. The European Youth Goals can for that reason not be seen as an indicator on youth involvement in an agenda setting-process.

5. 3. 4 Communication Structure

The findings indicate that interaction between young participants and EU institutions is highly structured and organized in cyclical processes. Among the mechanisms examined, the Youth Dialogue appears to have the most formalized structure for communication. The EU Youth Dialogue is divided into two phases, with three conferences. The first phase is the consultation phase where both National Youth Councils and EU-level organisations work to collect voices from young people around the EU. During the second phase, referred to as the implementation phase, participants’ ideas are developed into recommendations (European Youth Forum, N.D b). Based on the Youth Dialogue cycle-process, it is possible to identify a regular frequency of interaction, which is institutionalized and works similarly throughout each dialogue cycle. This indicates that there is a predictability in the participation processes and suggests that there are tools put in place to ensure recurring engagement. However, based

on the fact that the cycle mainly allows for limited meetings in the form of the conferences, this could be an indicator of the limited ability for youth to participate consistently.

5. 3. 5 Limitation in reciprocity and feedback

While the data shows that the EU:s mechanisms for collecting youth input are to some extent developed, and according to the policy officers at the Commission “ *the most established mechanism for youth participation and clearly integrated into the Youth Strategy*” (Interview, Gardelin), the findings also suggest that one of the main issues with EU:s mechanisms for youth participation is the lack of feedback on youth input (Lonean and Brandt, 2024:39). All the respondents were asked about the follow up-processes where youth participants can get feedback on their input, where they all identified a lack of follow-up (Interview, Eriksson., Gardelin., Lindholm., Voicu).

At the end of each dialogue cycle, official documents summarize the conferences and the recommendations (Interview, Lindholm). However these documents do not include any information on what happens after the EU Youth Dialogue. Thus, while the dialogue offers a structured process for gathering inputs through consultations and other dialogue activities, the findings suggest that the feedback on how their input has been used is not clearly communicated. As highlighted in the interviews “*the absence of clearly defined follow-up mechanisms can affect the participant engagement*” (Interview, Voicu) and emphasizes on the importance of feedback and evaluation process to ensure meaningful participation. This has effects on the dialogue between the institutions and the participants (Lonean and Brandt, 2024:39), and indicates that the communication is limited in its reciprocal aspects. It continues to add on to that while young people have the opportunity to provide input, the return of information is limited which both paints a picture of the lack of deliberative elements as well as increases the characteristics of a more consultative role.

5. 4 Dimension 3 - To what extent do participants have influence?

This section analyses and evaluates to what extent the EU participatory mechanisms have resulted in any influence, or if it remains mainly symbolic in terms of youth washing. That

would be, giving young people a platform without actually taking their input into account (Bowman, 2024;1337-1339). The extent of influence relates to the roles of authority being mainly based on willingness of individuals, advisory and consultative as well as higher authority roles such as co-governance and direct authority (Fung, 2006:69). In the following chapter, it suggested that the extent of influence is limited and that it is difficult to trace how the participants' contributions result in influence.

5. 4. 1 Advisory status and lack of decision making power

It is important to emphasise that youth participants in EU participatory mechanisms, do not hold a co-decisional role in EU decision-making processes. At least not in a way that possesses rights to veto or legislative initiative. In the legislative processes it is the European Parliament together with the Council that has voting rights, and the Commission which presents the Commission's work plan (centre-piece of the EU agenda-setting) as well as the possibility to propose legislation (Interview, Eriksson; Cini and Borrogon, 2022: 239-246). For that reason, the findings consistently indicate that youth participants within the EU mechanisms have an advisory status where it can have more or less influence depending on the policy area. This means that it is possible for youth participants to participate with opinions and recommendations, which is taken more or less into account when a policy is suggested, formulated, voted on or implemented (Interview, Gardelin).

In terms of influence, Gardelin emphasizes that the Youth Dialogue has an advisory function. Young people do not participate directly in decision-making but can contribute with recommendations and perspectives. The Youth Dialogue gives young people an opportunity to contribute with perspectives to political discussions, but the decision-making power still lies with the EU institutions and the Member States (Interview, Gardelin). One main argument behind this is that youth policy is a national competence, which means that in many cases the EU institutions can only create platforms for participation rather than giving young people direct influence (Interview, Gardelin). This indicates a clear separation between participation and authority in the decision-making process, as it suggests that while young people are included in an advisory capacity, it is not possible for them to exercise any formal power. This can be argued to be an indicator of low ability to influence.

5. 4. 2. Institutional integration & indirect influence

While the data from the interviews, as well as lack of documentation supporting follow-up mechanisms, suggest that the role of youth participation remains advisory, there is also data indicating that the youth perspectives are being integrated into policy discussions (Lonean and Brandt, 2024:26). However, this comes down to one key factor, how integrated the mechanism is into the EU system and culture. It is possible to identify that indirect influence and authority varies between participatory mechanisms.

“The Youth Dialogue has a clearer mandate and more formalized processes than other initiatives, which means that its result can be better integrated into political discussions and policy development” Gardelin

This varies from the Advisory Board which is a new initiative described by the respondents as a pilot project (Interview, Eriksson., Gardelin). The Advisory Board does not have the same institutionalization or formal decision-making paths. As it is a new initiative, there are no clear mechanisms for how its recommendations should be translated into policy (Interview, Gardelin). The institutional integration of the Youth Dialogue and its integrated structure has allowed for pathways where the input from the Youth Conferences can reach policy-officers in working groups in the European Commission alongside decision-makers. The results of the Youth Dialogue, i.e. the recommendations, are compiled and integrated into council documents, which increases the transparency as well as the possibility of influence (Interviews, Gardelin., Lindholm). These documents serve as the primary mechanism for transmitting youth input into institutional processes (Interview, Lindholm).

“For this reason the Youth Dialogue has greater potential for policy impact than more informal initiatives such as the Advisory Board, since the process is linked to the EU's institutional structures” Gardelin

However, despite having comparatively greater opportunities for participation, the Youth Dialogue does not translate this potential into direct influence, which is why it could be seen as remaining indirect in practice. To reach influence the recommendations from the Youth Dialogue are dependent on being taken up by political actors or officials within the institutions in order to be translated into concrete policy proposals. In practice this means that

the impact partly depends on institutional support but also on the willingness of officials and decision-makers to use the recommendations (Interview, Eriksson). Neither one of the participants has been able to indicate any guarantee that recommendations from the EU Youth Dialogue are used in institutional working groups or by decision-makers. Instead, it is highlighted by one of the respondents that recommendations often remain within the working party on youth, which indicates that the mechanism for youth participation has a limited horizontal integration in policy areas such as transportation, budget, infrastructure, etc (Interview, Eriksson). Although the EU Youth Dialogue is described as the most integrated mechanism for youth participation (Interview, Gardelin; Lonean and Brandt, 2024:25), the findings indicate that the dialogue might not be integrated enough into policy-working groups. During the interviews the respondents all described a perceived willingness among EU officials to increase youth participation and a shared recognition among its importance (Interviews, Eriksson., Gardelin). The respondents who represented youth organisations agreed that the willingness of individual policy officers might be higher than the integrated institutional security for participation (Interviews, Eriksson., Voicu). However, even if the findings show a high willingness from those working with policy, there is another aspect that indicates a low institutional integration of the participation mechanisms.

“Many view youth participation and influence as important, but are unsure on how to do this in their own operations” Gardelin

This suggests that while willingness may be lacking, there appears to be a gap in knowledge regarding how recommendations from youth conferences and other participatory mechanisms are integrated, which further indicates limited effectiveness of the participatory mechanisms. With the aim of the Youth Dialogue being to include youth in all phases of policy-making across all sectors, it is possible to identify a lack in effectiveness of the mechanisms since it does not fulfill its aim. While youth participants may contribute to policy discussions, it is still dependent on the willingness as well as knowledge of EU officials to go further (Interview, Eriksson). Indicating limited influence as well as the overall effectiveness of the mechanism being low.

5. 4. 3 *Follow-up mechanisms and accountability*

This section differs from section 5.3.5 which discusses the feedback from the communication process as well as the two-way communication between the participants and the institutions. Instead, this section focuses on the follow-up mechanisms in regard to policy outcomes, implementation and accountability. It is about the effect rather than how the participant interacts (Fung, 2006: 67-69). In relation to that there are limitations in the institutional integration of participation mechanisms, the findings indicate that follow-up mechanisms within EU youth participation are non-existent to limited (Interview, Lindholm). However, it is possible to identify variations within the mechanisms in regards to the extent they have integrated follow-up processes. In the previous section it was established that this may be due to the variation in how integrated a mechanism is into the structure of the EU decision-making process. In the EU Youth Dialogue the results from the consultative phase are translated into recommendations which later reaches the Youth Dialogue phase of implementation, where outcomes from the dialogue are documented into official reports and Council conclusions (Interview, Lindholm; MUCF, N.D). These documents serve as a formal mechanism for transmitting and recording youth input, since they need to be adopted by the Council of Ministers (Interview, Gardelin., Lindholm). This could result in influence, however, it is the extent of it that remains low.

“To my knowledge, there are no evaluations or reports on the impact of the recommendations” (Interview, Lindholm). This statement shows that even while one could argue that formal follow-up exists due to it being included in council documents, it is difficult to identify any indications on the recommendations having more than only informal influence. Instead, a majority of the respondents could not recall any case within the *current* EU Youth Strategy where the recommendations from the EU Youth Dialogue had led to an impact on policy in the form of changing an outcome, discussion or led to a new initiative. A majority of the respondents referred to the Youth Guarantee, a youth employment initiative presented in 2013, as an example of policy resulting from the youth-related consultations and discussions. (Interviews, Eriksson, Gardelin, Lindholm). Another example that was mentioned in regards to policy influence is the *current* advocacy for banning unpaid internships (Interview, Voicu), which has reached attention and support within the EU institutions. It should be noted that no decision has been made on the matter of banning unpaid internships. This suggests that youth

input can contribute to policy change over time, however a majority of the respondents agreed to the following:

“It is difficult to point to concrete policy results as the recommendations often remain within the working group on youth related questions [...] there is no clear mechanism that ensures impact” Eriksson

As highlighted in the interviews, there are difficulties in identifying concrete policy changes due to recommendations often remaining within internal discussions (Interview, Eriksson). During the interviews it was also revealed that the output of both consultations and recommendations varies from time to time and depending on recommendation (Interview, Voicu). The fact that there have been some examples where participation has affected policy-development indicates that the mechanism has the potential to lead to influence, but that it remains rather limited since the follow-up mechanism relies primarily on documents being used by policy-working groups (Interview, Eriksson). For this reason it remains difficult to trace how youth input translates into policy change or influences policies, and it further limits the ability to assess the impact. However, the lack of ability to assess the impact in itself strengthens the indication that youth influence remains low.

While the findings does indicate that the mechanisms for youth participation, such as the EU Youth Dialogue, does not lead to a high level of influence, it does not necessarily speak for effectiveness on accountability. There is no formal obligation for the EU institutions to act upon or respond further to youth recommendations (Interview, Gardelin). This indicates a limitation in the level of accountability within the participation process, since there is no forced accountability on the institutions. Even if the institution does not “have to act”, this still leads to negative implications of the system since it affects the participants perception of the process (Interview, Voicu). One of the respondents, representing the European Youth Forum, raised that there is an importance in having a clear and defined follow-up process. He noted that the absence of these can lead to disengagement among youth. For this reason the European Youth Forum has proposed an additional mechanism for participation to ensure youth influence among all policy sectors, the so called “Youth Tests”. The Youth Test can be described as another mechanism for ensuring youth perspectives, focusing on assessment of relevancy, meaningful engagement, impact assessment, mitigation measures and publication of results to ensure mainstreaming of the youth perspective across all policy sectors

(European Youth Forum, N.D b; Interview, Voicu). These tests are still in a “design” phase, and the results of them remain unknown. Overall, the ability to trace policy-result from youth participation mechanisms tends to be weak as well as inconsistently implemented. The findings suggest that the overall structure limits youth influence to the extent to which youth input that is used in policy-processes are low. This could be a potential result of the lack of accountability in ensuring that the recommendations come to use.

5. 4. 4. Conditions for policy impact

Since the data shows that youth participants have the opportunity to influence, even if it is to a low extent and only in some cases, it becomes important to examine what the conditions are for policy impact. The findings suggest that youth influence on policy outcomes depends on a number of institutional and structural conditions rather than a guaranteed influence. That youth influence depends on these conditions relates back to the institutionalized agenda-setting capacity. As mentioned in section 5.3.3 the respondents were under the impression that young participants tend to focus on broad-societal issues, which does not always fit into the policy areas within the EU's own political priorities (Interviews, Eriksson, Lindholm). The broad focus of the youth participants' input ends up functioning as a hindering factor towards influence.

“Youth recommendations are more likely to influence policy when they align with existing policy priorities and institutional agendas.” Lindholm

Based on this statement it is possible to identify that one of the conditions for impact is specifness as well as the relation to ongoing policy priorities and process within the institutions. As mentioned by both Lindholm and Gardelin, specific and policy-relevant proposals are more likely to be translated into concrete measures. The condition becomes clearer by looking at institutionalized mechanisms such as the Youth Dialogue and the Advisory Board, where the degree of institutionalization seems to be the key for youth influence. The EU Youth Dialogue, which is described by the respondents as highly embedded within the EU's structures, has well established procedures for collecting youth input (Interview, Gardelin). This differs from the Advisory Board, which is still in its pilot phase and for that reason lacks the same level of defined procedures which links it to the policy making processes (Interview, Gardelin). While they have in common that they are

institutionalized enough to follow an institutional agenda-setting and framework based on the EU's political priorities, it still demonstrates how more institutionalized mechanisms provide a higher possibility to influence by having recommendations included in the Council documents. It provides an “easier” pathway for the input to enter policy discussions (Interview, Lindholm). Since the less institutionalized developed mechanism such as the Advisory Board lacks the same structured channels, it can be suggested that institutionalization provides a condition for impact and influence.

5. 4. 5. Symbolic & Legitimizing Power

Despite limited formal authority, youth participation does raise an important meta-dimension. The findings suggest that youth participation fulfills other goals that do not only include participation and influence in the policy and decision-making process. Instead it can be implied that the youth participation mechanism has both symbolic and legitimating functions (Interview, Eriksson).

Respondents were asked about the possibility of the EU mainly trying to “check” a participation box by consulting youth participants, which refers to the terms of youth washing. This question was based on previous studies in the field of youth participation, which argued that youth participation could be used as a legitimizing tool for policymakers by fronting that young people have been included and responded to political processes (Bowman, 2024:1337-1339). However, even if one of the respondents answered that this could be the case with the EU mechanism for youth participation, it was also highlighted in the same interview that participation such as the EU Youth Dialogue and other initiatives contributes to strengthening a sense of European identity and fostering transnational exchange among young people (Interview, Eriksson).

“The Youth Dialogue strengthens the European identity, it promotes transnational exchange, it contributes to the legitimization of the European project” Eriksson

It is possible to argue around two sides of this statement. First, even if it could indicate that youth participants are included to symbolically legitimize rather than providing concrete input, the interviews do suggest that participation does not only serve as a channel for

influence but contributes to the overall European Project, which is highly connected with democracy and participation (Interview, Eriksson). Additionally, it is possible to suggest that the presence of youth participants may only offer perceived inclusiveness in the decision-making processes, even if youth lacks formal decision-making power. The focus in this argument is put on the aspect of "perceived" inclusiveness, where participation stands at risk for falling under the term youth washing and being symbolic without leading to any actual influence (Bowman, 2024:1337-1339). The suggested lack of follow-up mechanisms, both in terms of continued communication and the ability to trace influence to concrete action (Interviews, Eriksson., Gardelin., Voicu) indicates that participation may remain at the level of "symbolic" or "perceived" influence rather than resulting in impact. This is despite the willingness from EU officials to interact with youth participants (Interview, Gardelin). Several findings, especially from the Youth Dialogue cycles reports (to be discussed deeper in 5.5), indicate that youth continuously ask for an increased follow-up mechanism that makes it possible to follow the process of their input (Lonean and Bradt, 2024a:8,39). This strengthens the indication of youth perspectives being used without leading to actual changes, further suggesting youth washing within EU youth participation mechanisms.

"Youth continuously has to use their influence to ask for influence" Voicu

The continued need to use the provided space to ask for influence and inclusion could be an indication that participation does not necessarily translate to influence. It suggests that even the indirect and informal influence remains low, and there continues to be an overall feeling of not being included (Interview, Voicu). This, in combination with weak follow up mechanisms, strengthens the suggestion of symbolic inclusion. In this context, Eriksson's argument becomes of high importance since it highlights that the symbolic function of participation could compensate for the limited formal authority and the indirect influence as it still provides for an important platform for organisational and transnational exchange (Interview, Eriksson).

5.5 Empirical illustrations: EU Youth Dialogue Cycles

In this section a set of empirical illustrations will be presented based on selected cycles of the EU Youth Dialogue. The selected cases are the 7th cycle of the dialogue, the first cycle implemented under the Youth Strategy 2019-2027, and the 10th cycle, which was the latest completed cycle at the time of writing. The aim with this section is to empirically demonstrate how the identified patterns above, in the dimensions of participation, communication and authority, works in practice.

5. 5. 1. Creating opportunities for all, the 7th cycle (1 January 2019 - 30 June 2020)

The 7th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue, conducted under the trio presidency of Romania, Finland and Croatia, was the first cycle within the Youth Strategy 2019-2027. The cycle focused on the theme “Creating opportunities for youth” which addressed the 7th, 8th and 6th Youth Goals regarding employment, education, and rural inclusion. With the consultations by national, as well as European working groups, they reached a total of about 56.000 young respondents, which illustrates a broad outreach with participants (Youth Goals, 2020a:2).

5. 5. 1. 1. Participation

This cycle illustrates a broad outreach in terms of participation, as 56.000 young people were reached as well as involved in some type or form in the consultation process. During the consultation process about 30,533 young people participated in a survey, and about 25.744 participated through another method (Youth Goals, 2020a:2). The Youth Goals report from the 7th cycle of the dialogue shows the following statistics for participants:

Table 3. Source: *Youth Dialogue - 7th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue: Summary of findings, Youth Goals, 2020*

Age	Amount of participants (If they were 100)
<16	19
16-18	29
19-25	34

26-30	18
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Table 4. Source: *Youth Dialogue - 7th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue: Summary of findings, Youth Goals, 2020*

Other category	Amount of participants (If they were 100)
From rural areas	36
Disabled	5
Ethnic minority	13
Religious minority	13
LBTQ+	10

The high number of participants does indicate a relatively open participation in the consultative process (phase 1). During the consultation process, methods such as the surveys allow for open and broad participation. For that reason it can be suggested that at least the 30.533 young participants who took part in the survey participated through open participation. While the early consultative phase remains open, it is the later stages of the participatory processes that limits the participation. The conferences allowed for two representatives from each member state, as this is the standard within the structure, which goes through the process of nominations from the National Youth Councils (Interview, Eriksson; MUCF, N.D; LSU, N.D). This implies a structured and limited process for participation. At these later stages of cycle 7 the access to participation was primarily structured through youth organisations rather than open participation. While the overall number of participants is high, there is still an identified limitation to access to participation because of its institutional and organisational structure. It is not fully open or individually accessible.

5. 5. 1. 2. Communication and decision mode

For the section regarding communication and decision mode within the 7th cycle, the illustrations show the structure of interaction, deliberative elements as well as the agenda-setting capacity.

The 7th cycle dialogue followed a structured process, from consultation to recommendations set out in the Work Plan (Official Journal of the European Union, C 456, 2018). The consultation processes were structured by national and the European working groups, who received guidelines from the European Steering Group. These guidelines included questions to ask during surveys and dialogues, and how to include focus groups and large-scale Youth Dialogue events (European Commission, 2020:11). However, while these methods do create equal opportunities for participation since they reach a broad number of participants (Lonean and Bradt, 2024:26), they mainly allow for a “consultative“ and “input based” framework, rather than being an example of deliberative participation in the aspect of two-way communication. The young participants who took part in the 7th cycle dialogue were able to provide input and consult on political priorities such as quality employment, learning and inclusion. The agenda was built upon the Youth Goals (Youth Goals, 2020a:4-10; European Commission, 2020:10). Even if there is a possibility of this being a result of youth agenda setting, it continues to strengthen the suggestion that the framework follows a consultative structure.

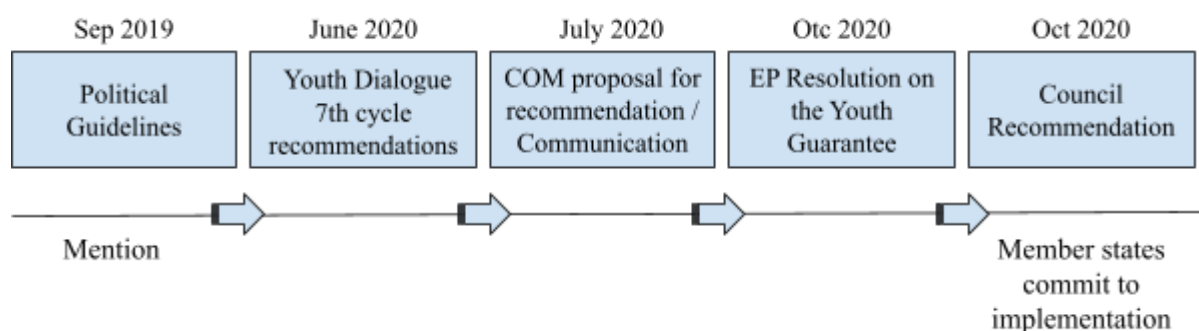
Although, based on the conference's outcomes it was possible to identify deliberative elements. During the conferences, the two representatives from each member state were a part of a working group. It was through these working groups / workshops that the recommendations and examples of good practices were formulated and created through elements of discussion and negotiation (Youth Goals, 2020b:5). These recommendations were in the implementation stage presented to the Council and Commission. However, each working group evaluates individually, which could indicate that the position in the recommendation is not necessarily an agreed or representative opinion shared by the more broad reach of participants (Youth Goals, 2020b:5). This suggests that when the opinions collected by the consultative processes in the member states reach the EU-level conferences, it could potentially be filtered and summarized by the working groups. It also stands at risk for not being representative of a broader youth perspective.

5. 5. 1. 3. Authority

At the end of cycle 7, the outcomes from the consultative processes (phase 1) and conferences were formulated into policy recommendations and submitted to the Council and the Commission (Official Journal of the European Union, 2020, C 212 I/01). Although the respondents during the interviews argued that inclusion in the Council documents in itself is an indicator of influence in policy-making processes (Interview, Lindholm) it becomes relevant to evaluate to which extent the recommendations have been included in policies or if there is no indicator on either feedback or being further used.

During the interviews, the respondents highlighted "Youth Guarantee" as a successful example of a youth initiative that has had influence and resulted in policy (Interview, Lindholm). Even if this might be the case, it is also an example of a case that strongly indicates the link between the institutional agendas and political priorities with how influential a youth initiatives gets. One of the recommendations from the 7th cycle was to *"further support and facilitate meaningful youth participation in the development and evaluation of labour markets policies, with an emphasis on the development and implementation of the Youth Guarantee"* (Official Journal of the European Union, 2020, C 212 I/01). This council recommendation was voted on 26th of June 2020. It is by no means a new initiative but builds on a council recommendation from 2013 (European Parliament, N.D). However, already in the Council's political guidelines in 2019 presented by the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen the Youth Guarantee is mentioned. *"Building on the success of the youth guarantee, she will turn the youth guarantee into a permanent instrument to fight youth unemployment, with an increased budget and regular reporting to ensure it delivers what it promises in every member state"* (European Parliament, N.D). This indicates that this was presented by the Commission long before any outcomes or conclusions from the Youth Dialogue cycle would have been done.

Figure 3. Youth Guarantee Timeline Sources: *European Parliament, Youth Guarantee - Legislative Train, N.D; Official Journal of the European Union, 2020, C 212 I/01*



As can be seen in the figure above, the recommendations from the youth dialogue are dated before both commission proposals for recommendation and the council recommendation. The following important documents were released after Youth Dialogue outcomes:

- Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of regions “*Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation*”
- Proposal from the Commission to Council Recommendation on a Bridge to Jobs - Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee
- European Parliament resolution of 8 October on the Youth Guarantee
- European Economic and Social Committee, Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee, opinion, 29 October 2020
- Council Recommendation of 30 October 2021 on A Bridge to Jobs - *Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee*

It could be argued that the input from the consultations and the recommendations could have influenced working groups and the documents posted after June 2020. However, the recommendation is not referenced or mentioned in a single one of the documents above which

strongly indicates a low authority and influence, in addition to exclusion of the youth perspective. It was not possible to identify that any of the other recommendations had been involved in any other institutional process or if they had been included in discussions or policy working groups. For that reason it is difficult to be certain how much influence it actually had. However, it is still possible to come to the conclusion that institutional priorities and already existing policy processes matter when it comes to inclusion of youth perspectives, as confirmed by the respondents in the interviews (Interview, Gardelin, Lindholm). While the recommendations from cycle 7 were formally adopted (Official Journal of the European Union, 2020, C 212 I/01), it is not possible to trace their translation into concrete policy outcomes. It should be noted that previous research states that the lack of traceable documents in these processes should not be considered an indicator on non-influence, since they can be used without being listed (Lonean and Bradt, 2024:26). For that reason, the data of political priorities combined with the interviews becomes fundamental. This suggests that youth participation within the 7th cycle is primarily advisory in nature, closely connected to the institutional framework and priorities and has limited influence on decision-making processes.

By analyzing documents from other cycles, such as the 9th, it is possible to explore how earlier cycles, including the 7th, have been framed in discourse. In the official documents, it becomes evident that cycles previous to the 9th have raised issues regarding participants' ability to trace their impact. In their recommendations it is mentioned that *“youth need to take part of the entire decision-making process at every stage, and that their participation should not be limited to the consultation phase alone”* (Official Journal of the European Union, 2023, C 185/04). This strongly indicates that youth participation is lacking regarding participation, communication, and authority. Other concerns in the document included youth washing, where they highlighted that *“Efforts must be undertaken to ensure that the presence of young people is not used as a youth washing mechanism”* as well as that fact that tools such as the Youth Dialogue are not equipped with effective tools for being a part of the decision-making structures (Official Journal of the European Union, 2023, C 185/04). This shows that almost three years after the implementation of the Youth Strategy, youths are still requesting decision-making processes that allows for youth participation at all stages, as well as being able to follow up and monitor the process of how their ideas lead to co-creation of policies and influences decision making. This suggests a lack of efficiency in reaching the aim

to provide an influential platform as well as meeting the request for increased follow-up mechanisms.

5. 5. 2 We need youth, the 10th cycle (1 July 2023 - 31 December 2024)

The 10th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue was conducted under the trio presidency of Spain, Belgium and Hungary (European Youth Portal, N.D b). With a focus on youth goal #3 Inclusive Societies, its main focus was on promoting youth participation in policy making within all policy areas. It especially emphasized the importance of youth participation in all stages of policy making, that would be, from idea, to formulation, implementation, and evaluation (Official Journal of the European Union, 2024, C7402).

5. 5. 2. 1 Participation

With the findings from the 10th cycle of the Youth Dialogue, which is also the latest “finished” cycle at the time of writing, it is possible to suggest that even what is described as the most institutionalized tool for youth participation within the EU could be viewed as ineffective. Rather than focusing here on who participates in types of representativeness, it becomes relevant to focus on what is asked for. During the first conference, held in Alicante, Spain, it was described that participants continued to ask for youth to be included in all stages of policy making (Bárta and Moxon, 2023:17-22). In particular, it is an indication that youth participants are still excluded from policy-making processes, or at least that their participation is conditional. This was also lifted by the European Youth Forum President, by claiming that “*There has been a need to continue to use the space to ask for space*” (Interview, Voicu)

5. 5. 2. 2 Communication and Decision-making mode

In regards to how participants communicate and take part in the decision-making process, the data from the 10th cycle indicates that the role remains largely consultative. As stated above, the data from the cycle highlights that the participants continue to argue for a more “co-creational role” in the policy-making processes (Official Journal of the European Union, 2024, C7402; Bárta and Moxon, 2023:17-22). This could be described as a change in what is now expected by the youth participants when it comes to the communication between participants and institutions. Youth are demanding more deliberative elements in the future

(Bárta and Moxon, 2023:17-22; Interview, Vociu), which suggests that current and past forms have been mainly consultative. From the outcomes and conference reports it is clear that the young participants have continued to ask for better insight and communication as well. The following is presented in the Council recommendation from the dialogue:

“Provide regular feedback to young people and youth organisations about the EUYD process, its outcomes and follow-up in order to ensure meaningful dialogue and youth participation at all levels” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2024, C7402)

This indicates that youth participants ask for more transparent processes and increased communication, which suggests that current processes are limited in these terms. With the processes being described as a continuously long lack of feedback mechanism it is not possible to describe the dialogues as deliberative in terms of justification or communication (Bárta and Moxon, 2023:23). In terms of dialogue as well as accountability, it was highlighted by both youth participants and researchers during the dialogue that policy-makers should be held more accountable, and that together with an increased dialogue there is a need for concrete outcomes. Accountability can here be understood as the responsibility policy-makers have in justifying how the participants' input are taken into account (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6). It was highlighted by experts as well as participants of the 10th dialogue cycle that the ministries need to communicate more clearly how they use young people's recommendations in order for the processes to be more transparent (Bárta and Moxon, 2023:23).

Based on this, it can be suggested that even if the EU has well institutionalized processes, it does still lack a two-way communication that would be needed for youth participants to participate in another capacity than just consultative.

5. 5. 2. 3 Authority

Compared with the outcomes and recommendations from the 7th cycle, the 10th cycle does not include the same type of policy-related recommendations. However it is still possible to get a picture on *to which extent young participants have influence* in terms of *authority*. The data indicates that while participation mechanisms such as the Youth Dialogue are to some extent influential over conclusions or/and decisions, there are still clear limitations when it

comes to policy areas that are not necessarily considered “Youth Policy” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2024, C7402). One of the main conclusions from the conference in Hungary was the following:

“The EUYD's impact on Council conclusions is identifiable, but there is a potential to further strengthen it also possibly beyond youth policy. This requires better visibility monitoring, follow-up mechanisms and youth mainstreaming” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2024, C7402)

This citation indicates that the participants continued to ask for stronger mechanisms that lead to concrete outcomes, and that this is done through accountability from policy makers, monitoring, and follow up process (Official Journal of the European Union, 2024, C7402). At the time of writing, it has been almost 18 months since the 10th cycle ended. Although, during the interviews it was still brought up by several of the respondents that there still is a lack of accountability that goes beyond the “willingness” of policy officials, as well as an currently existing lack of follow-up process allowing participants to follow the influence of their participation (Interview, Gardelin., Lindholm). This confirms the suggestion that even if the EU Youth Dialogue is institutionalized, institutionalized does not equal effectiveness when it comes to ensuring influence.

However, there are indications based on other council recommendations that the youth participants taking part of the 10th cycle of the Youth Dialogue have executed influence (Official Journal of the European Union, 2023, C1342). In the resolution it was mentioned that participants highlighted the need to *“implement measures such as the EU Youth Test”* in order to increase interaction between young people and EU decision makers. This was described by respondents from the European Youth Forum as one of the youth initiatives which has started to affect EU Policy (Interview, Vociu; European Youth Forum, N.D b). The EU Youth Test, as presented in 5.4, can be described as a tool for ensuring that youth perspectives are mainstreamed across all policy-sectors and well fitted into the European Union's decision-making structure, with the intention to increase youth influence (European Youth Forum, N.D b). For this reason, it could be seen as an example of when the EU actually has used the outcomes from the dialogue to work with future policy processes, which could indicate youth influence as well as a more co-creational authority. However, the data here becomes contradictory in the two following ways.

Firstly, it is possible to identify a contradiction between the data from the interviews with the data and analysis of the EU documents. While the interviews paint a picture of the Youth Test as a youth initiative and tool for influence (Interview, Voicu; European Youth Forum, N.D b), other data continues to indicate that it is yet another example of a dialogue initiative that builds up from consultative processes and agenda setting based on an institutionalized framework. The EU Youth Test was an initiative pre-consultations as it has been mentioned in several other documents. In 2023 the Council released its conclusions on *promoting youth mainstreaming in policy decision-making processes in the European Union* (Official Journal of the European Union, 2023, C1342). In the conclusion it is written that the Youth Test was called for already in 2022 during the European Year of Youth by the European Parliament. It was also mentioned in the Charter on Youth on Democracy by the European Committee of the Regions in the same year. Specifically, they called for the *"establishment of a youth-test mechanism to ensure that all new EU legislation and policy is subject to a youth focused impact assessment"* (Official Journal of the European Union, 2023, C1342). The fact that the consultation process (phase 1) of cycle 10 did not start until 2023, and what was discussed during those consultations to later be considered an outcome in 2024, is an indicator that the EU Youth Dialogue continues to follow an institutionalized framework based on the institution's political priorities. This further confirms that it is difficult for youth participants to influence agenda as well as outcome.

Secondly, one of the mentioned limitations in the outcomes as well as from the interviewed respondents was the difficulty for youth participants to have influence in policy areas that is not necessarily considered youth policy (Interview, Voicu., Lindholm; Official Journal of the European Union, 2024, C7402). This means that even if the Youth Test is seen by one of the respondents as a youth initiative, its classification as "youth policy" could explain why it appears more frequently in official documents and is on its way to becoming part of the EU's institutional tools. However, as this study finds that even if it was included in the consultations from the 10th cycle, it was not an initiative stemming from the 10th cycle of the Youth Dialogue. Since the cycles often build on each other, it could mean that it is an initiative from another cycle not studied in this thesis. Therefore, it still could be considered an example of where youth participants have been able to influence future policy processes, but it cannot be seen as an example from the 10th cycle nor as an example that has not been affected by the institutionalized agenda-setting. Considering that the data indicates that the

EU institutions primarily shape the frameworks and largely enable only consultative forms of influence, and that the Youth Test was already referenced by the institutions prior to the consultations, it can be suggested that the Youth Dialogue is not successful in providing co-creational influence. The lack of possibility to follow up on how the recommendations from the 10th cycle has been used, as well as the indication that one of the recommendations actually has its foundations from an institutional initiative instead suggests that there could be a risk for youth washing. The indication that the Youth Test was already an initiative pre-consultation could indicate that it is an example of where institutions such as the Commission created a perception of influence that remains of symbolic character.

Overall, the 10th cycle illustrates that there is currently a need for more youth influence in form of deliberation and transparency, since the current mechanism has limitations in ensuring meaningful participation. While the EU Youth Dialogue is described as the most effective and institutionalized tool to ensure youth influence, the findings highlight that there are challenges in access to participation, accountability, as well as translating the consultative processes into real policy influence.

6 Discussion

This study examined and evaluated to what extent EU youth participation mechanisms such as the EU Youth Dialogue and the President Youth Advisory Board has resulted in political influence, or if it has remained mainly symbolic and as a legitimizing tool for the democratic system. In this following section, the findings will be discussed and further analysed in connection with Deliberative Democracy Theory, which mainly argues that a political order has reached legitimacy when its policies can be justified to all those living under its laws and refers to the importance of the involvement, or at least justification by the citizens (in this case, youth) in policy-making processes (Chambers, 200:307; Dryzek, 2002:1-2; Cini and Borrogon, 2022; 474; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6).

As active participation of multiple actors, such as interest groups, experts, representatives, and individual citizens, is one of the core conditions of this study's definition of democracy (Cini and Borrogon, 2022: 131), the political order needs to have shown elements of two-way communication, justifiable policy-making, and an open process (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6, Dryzek, 2002: 1-2). With the aim of the EU youth participation tools being to offer young citizens a platform where they can raise their perspectives and contribute to the EU decision-making process, the elements of deliberation are used to analyse whether this aim is fulfilled (Official Journal of the European Union, 2018, C 456/01). However, together with Fung's (2006) three dimensions of participation, communication and authority the findings suggest that access to participation remains limited through the civil society organisational structures as well through institutional ones. Based on this it is possible to identify that the political order is not equally open to everyone, constraining that the policies can be justified by all. Even if it is a central element of deliberation that representatives are equally capable of taking part of the deliberative process as long as it is justifiable (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6), it could still be interpreted by the findings that there is limitation in terms of who is represented. While minority groups tend to be overly represented, there is a lack of representation for youth in rural areas as well as

outside education, training or employment (Interview, Gardelin). Representation of unorganized groups continues to be an issue, which strengthens the argument for unsuccessful elements of deliberation within the aim of the youth participation mechanisms. The input that is put forward, cannot be justified by all youth.

For citizens to play an active part of a deliberative democracy system, elements such as two-way communication is central (Dryzek, 2002: 1-2). For the participation to be considered “higher in intensity” as well as influence, communication should go further than just expressing preferences (Fung, 2006:68). The participants, which further along in the processes are mainly youth representatives, should be able to shape agendas as well as outcomes through either develop preferences, aggregate and bargain, deliberate and negotiate or deploy technique and expertise, as these are considered more intense according to the democratic cube (Fung, 2006:68-69). In this case, for the system to be considered deliberative, there should be elements of two-way communication as well as the possibility to shape the agenda and outcomes of discussions and arguments. This centralizes the exchange between the different actors (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6). While the findings were able to identify certain deliberative elements such as dialogue, follow-up questions during the Advisory Board meetings alongside opportunities to elaborate on preferences, these interactions were found to be closely tied to the institutional framework. Since the agenda-setting capacity for both the Youth Dialogue as well as the Advisory Board is mainly a competence of the institutions- / trio of presidencies the deliberation becomes conditioned. This limits the extent to which the youth participation mechanisms in the EU can be considered deliberative, since they are not fully able to contribute to either the agenda or outcomes. The asymmetry in influencing agenda and outcomes through communication constrains the two-way communication that is central to the idea of deliberation in a political system (Dryzek, 2002: 1-2). Participation within the system can for that reason be understood as consultative rather than deliberative, which becomes problematic since the difficulty in affecting what is up for deliberation. Even if previous research (Lonean and Bradt, 2024:21-22) argues that youth influences the agenda through the European Youth Goals, which has been decided based the 6th cycle of the Youth Dialogue, it has been interpreted by the findings of this study that the foundation and structure of the Youth Dialogue does not include enough elements of deliberation to be considered representative or justifiable by the general youth.

As mentioned, a political order and democracy that is deliberative should not only allow for the expression of preferences, but allow for a connection between input and outcome as well as showing accountability towards perspectives of outside groups (Dryzek, 2002:2). However, the findings in this study shows that youth participation within the EU remains largely advisory. Even if it was possible to find that youth input is formally recognized through Council recommendations, it has been difficult to trace how these recommendations actually have had the opportunity to lead, or have led, to policy changes and/or influenced decisions. The link between youth participation and decision would of course be indirect in many cases, since youth do not have any formal voting or initiative right in the legislative processes, and the institutions are in no way bound to take the perspectives into account. Previous research also highlights that it is often difficult to trace whether and how recommendations are taken into account, although this lack of visibility does not necessarily imply their absence in policy processes. Instead the previous research has actually concluded that mechanisms such as the EU Youth Dialogue is effective, since it is able to consult a large number of youth, and that there are confirmed ties between the consultative processes and policy (Lonean and Bradt, 2024:26). However, the lack of traceable input and output, together with the tendency for recommendation to remain with youth policy working groups and be conditioned to existing political priorities, as well as the individual willingness of EU officials, suggests that the indications for influence are low. Even if the recommendations in itself can be seen as an exchange of arguments, the communication is limited to only being one-way with a low degree of meaningful participation with the opportunity to influence. This indicates not only a low degree of deliberative democracy, but also limited effectiveness of EU youth participation mechanisms, especially when measured against the aim of enabling influence beyond expression opinions. Based on this, youth participation in the EU can be understood as formally recognized but limited in providing influence, since it lacks the right means to have a traceable influence.

To understand how untraceable links between input and outcome, and a low degree of deliberative elements indicates on mainly using the youth participation mechanisms as a symbolic tool for legitimizing the democratic system, the term youth washing becomes important. To reach legitimate decisions, the public, by themselves or by their

representatives should have had the opportunity to influence, which in this case includes both agenda and decisions (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004:3-6). For that reason it becomes problematic with processes that show tendencies towards mainly being symbolic. As youth participation tends to be consultative, with low capability to influence agenda settings or co-create policy it risks functioning as a legitimizing tool (Bowman, 2024;1337-1339). This partially comes down to that input is untraceable together with the conditions tied to willingness and political priorities. In this context, the mechanisms for youth participation risk creating an image of deliberative participation without ensuring the opportunity for influence.

By examining and evaluating the dimensions of participation, communication and authority in context to DDT and youth washing, it is possible to suggest that there are several constraints to the youth participation mechanisms that hinder an effective use. While the mechanisms are institutionalized and begin to open up for the opportunity to participate, the extent of how participation leads to influence is greatly limited. From a deliberative democracy perspective, there is a gap between inclusion and impact where young participants can be involved in the decision making processes, but only through already existing institutional interest and low connections between voiced perspectives and influence. Although there is a presence of deliberative elements through dialogue, the consequences of having very limited feedback and transparency tools creates a limited system. The one-way communication, mainly being able to provide perspectives to pre-decided questions and lack of feedback and transparency creates a risk for youth washing, where participation is mainly meant to legitimize rather than influence decision-making processes. In this sense, the study shows that EU youth participation mechanisms are ineffective in creating deliberative elements, where all citizens can play equal parts in the decision making system, as opportunities to participate both are unequal as well as most of the time, uninfluential.

7 Conclusion

Youth participation in the EU - real, symbolic or wishful thinking? This thesis was written with the aim to answer to *“to what extent, and under what conditions the EU's youth participation mechanisms provide young citizens with efficient tools for political influence?”*. The question relates back to the democratic deficit and the perceived gap between the union's citizens and their representatives which has alarmed scholars for the past years. (Kohler-Koch, 2013:12; Dezelan, 2023:37). To handle the democratic deficit, the institutions have focused on strengthening the involvement of the civil society as a way to legitimize and strengthen the democracy within the EU, where the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has focused on the youth as one of the most important groups to reach. However, since research about youth participation at times frame initiatives as youth washing (Bowman, 2024:1337-9), there has been a need to further research if the initiatives put forward, such as the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 as well as newer initiatives mainly functions for giving a perceived inclusiveness, or if it possible to link the inclusion of youth to any political outcomes. By focusing on the EU Youth Dialogue as well as the President's Youth Advisory Board this thesis has used the dimensions of the democratic cube to answer the questions of *who has access to participation? How do the participants communicate?, and to what extent do the participants have influence?*.

Based on the findings, it could be interpreted that while the mechanisms are representative to the extent that they are inclusive of many minority groups, there is a remaining issue of reaching unorganized youth which also have been highlighted by previous research (Pušnik and Banjac, 2023:1194-6). Those who are already embedded within the system as for example active members within the National Youth Councils tend to have more meaningful participation. Both the mechanisms indicate that the further away you are from the policy-makers, such as during the consultations within the EU Youth Dialogue, the more open the process is. However, when the contact with policy officers/makers becomes closer, the less inclusive the participation is. For the second dimension, it was possible to identify that communication from the young participants to the institutions is mainly focused around expressing preferences rather than allowing for more deliberative elements. While the

Advisory Board showed somewhat more deliberative elements in terms of two-way communication, both mechanisms still lacked central aspects of deliberation. Particularly in terms of feedback, and follow-up, together with justification in relation to both communication and decision-making processes. At last, there were difficulties tracing how the communication (input) had resulted in influence. By using the empirical illustrations of the Youth Dialogue cycles 7 and 10, it became clear that the transparency for how the input is used remains low. The recommendations put forward to the institutions as a result of the Youth Dialogue tend to stay within youth policy working groups, where they are conditioned to be further used both by the willingness as well as knowledge of individual EU officials. As this thesis examined both the highly institutionalized Youth Dialogue and the Advisory Board, which remains in a pilot phase, it became possible to identify that a higher degree of institutionalization does not necessarily result in a more effective pathway for youth influence. At the same time, the findings suggest a clear connection between political priorities of the European Commission and the issues on which the young participants are able to provide input and recommendations. Although previous research by Lonean and Bradt (2024) argues that the EU Youth Dialogue is an effective tool for collecting youth perspectives and potentially influencing the decision-making process, and that effectiveness should not be based on the traceability within EU documents, this thesis has come to a more critical conclusion. The continued ask for transparency, the limited traceability as well as the perception of limited influence, and the strong connection between participation and existing political priorities used together, suggests that the EU's mechanisms for youth participation remains limited in reaching their aim of providing young citizens with meaningful opportunities to contribute to the EU decision-making process. While it cannot with certainty be stated that the EU uses the participation mechanisms as a legitimizing tool in terms of youth washing, what is stated above still makes it possible to come to the conclusion that perceived influence is greater than the reality. Even with this thesis contributing to answering to what extent and under what conditions the EU youth mechanisms result in influence, further research of the deliberative elements within the mechanisms for youth participation would be needed. A longer research period including in-person observation of interaction between youth and policy makers/officers, including both conferences as well as other meetings would contribute to existing knowledge by filling the gap of uncertainty of deliberative elements and two-way communication that goes beyond an institutionalized framework and feed-back mechanisms.

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Appendix.

Interview Guide

The purpose of the interview: Get a better understanding of existing literature, as well as researching the mechanisms for youth participation, such as the EU Youth Dialogue and the President's Youth Advisory Board.

Coding dimension:

1. Participation (*Who has access to participation?*)
2. Communication (*How do the participants communicate?*)
3. Authority (*To what extent do the participants have influence?*)

Participation

- How is participation in EU youth-related processes organized in practice?
- How are participants or representatives selected for these processes?
- To what extent is participation open or selective?
- Which groups tend to be over- or underrepresented?
- Are there any barriers (social, economic, geographical) to participation?

Communication

- How are young people or youth representatives involved in defining issues or agendas?
- To what extent can the participants influence the agenda?
- How would you describe communication between youth participants and EU institutions such as follow-up and feed-back?
- Is the communication reciprocal or one-sided?

Authority

- To what extent do youth inputs influence policy or decision-making?
- At which stages of the policy process (agenda-setting, formulation, implementation) is influence and participation most possible?
- What happens after youth recommendations are submitted?
- Can you provide examples where youth input has influenced policy?
- Which factors determine whether input is taken seriously?

- Is influence institutionally secured or dependent on individual actors?

Other questions:

- Do they risk functioning mainly as tools of legitimation rather than meaningful participation?
- Is there anything important we have not discussed that you feel should be included in this study?