

# yo **UT**hILIZE e-democracy

**A GUIDE TO YOUTH FRIENDLY E-DEMOCRACY ON LOCAL LEVEL**



*“The freedom and human capacities of individuals must be developed to their maximum but individual powers must be linked to democracy in the sense that social betterment must be the necessary consequence of individual flourishing.”*

Henry Giroux

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## Introduction

No matter if we are talking about direct democracy, where citizens are directly involved into decision making by voting, or if we are talking about representative democracy, where citizens elect representatives to be their “voices”, principle of democracy is based on the involvement of people in the process of making decisions and shaping their lives and societies. Hence, active citizenship represents a key for having a true democracy. However, this is not a benefit one may enjoy in some country or community, but the right which need to be protected and empowered. Universal Declaration for Human Rights clearly recognizes active citizenship as a basic human right by saying “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.”, placing this issue high on the democratic agenda. However, nowadays opportunity to cast your vote once in a couple of years can hardly satisfy need of people to have their say on questions they are interested in and which directly reflect on their lives. As a result, people became disappointed with democratic and political processes, reduce participation and putting core of democracy into question.

Today more than ever people are expressing what they like or do not like, voting for that by “liking” on social networks, advocate for what they stand for by “sharing” and expressing their opinion through blogs, posts, videos. Internet made people very active in political, social, cultural and economic aspects of life. This especially goes for young people to whom online life is a serious part of the identity. But, despite those trends, use of new technologies in alleviating democracy is still on the low level. Although attractive, concepts of e-democracy and e-participation which use Internet to involve citizens into decision making are poorly applied in the work of public institutions. Citizens are not well informed and empowered on how to take part in the decision-making processes, while procedures for doing so can be extremely complicated and incomprehensible. Young people at their beginnings as active citizens, with fewer understanding of the democratic procedures, when faced to such systems often feel discouraged and uninterested. Thus, in order to ensure that young people as most innovative, creative and pursuant demographic group in one society are taking part in shaping their own lives and life of the communities, it is important to create youth friendly e-democracy system.

## What you can find in this guide

“Youthilize e-democracy” is guide created for local authorities and other actors from local level who intend to establish e-democratic and e-participation procedures adjusted to needs and habits of young people. Throughout its content, guide starts from the scratch – introducing most important definitions in e-democracy as seen through the eyes of young people. Many stakeholders on local have its own role in the process of establishing e-democracy, thus local authorities can find a valuable and necessary support in this process. When you have a clear picture of what you would like to achieve and on who you can count, then you should start from the basic problems that are preventing young people from participating in the life of local community. This means that it is not enough to design certain mechanisms, but you need to empower, motivate and inspire young people to participate. Also, there are many ways how young people can be involved into decision-making processes and these forms of e-participation are simplified by young people and found place on the pages of this guide. All those phases and forms are put into strategic approach advices for establishing e-democracy for young people on local level. Upon that, reader can find mechanisms for e-democracy designed by youth.

*This guide is a set of recommendations, examples of mechanisms for introducing e-democracy to young people on local level, tips and tricks intended to help local authorities to establish unique and engaging e-participation systems and strengthen active citizenship among youth.*

However, it should be noted that each local community has its own set of laws, procedures, traditions, social and cultural background, thus e-democracy system need to be adjusted to specific local context. Only that way, knowledge and ideas from young people collected in this guide can reach its full potential and make a meaningful step in empowering active citizenship among youth.

## Glossary

The “**Youthilize e-democracy**” guide is a tool which intends to help local authorities to better understand youth perspective of e-democracy and, based on that perspective, improve democratic procedures towards young people. First step on that way is to be clear about what the concept of e-democracy means and that is the reason why we are starting this guide with explaining terms of active citizenship, e-democracy and e-participation as seen through the eyes of young people. However, this guide isn't aiming to make another contribution to the scientific understanding of the concept and its definition, but to help representatives from local authorities to step into shoes of young people from the very beginning of the process of introducing e-democracy. Also, this guide is not covering threats that emerge outside of the use of Internet in these processes such as are fake news or security of individuals, but those aspects should be analyzed accordingly when developing e-democracy system for young people in certain local community.

### 1.1. #ActiveCitizenship and young people

As noted by the Council of Europe, citizenship today is far more than a legal citizenship constructed by the rights and responsibilities and includes the sense of belonging to certain community<sup>1</sup>. Making us a part of the community, citizenship entitles us with right to actively contribute to that community and participate in its shaping. It allows to decide or at least to contribute to decision of how the community we are part of should look like. Therefore, playing an active role in the society is an integral part of the citizenship itself. Phrase “Active Citizenship” in a simplified way means that one individual can freely and actively exercise all rights and responsibilities that emerge from the concept of citizenship as defined by the nation state.

Intensive technological development influenced to a high degree concept of citizenship, thus also the way people are exercising its aspects by being active citizens in the society. News and information are spreading fast and people join the online community in order to have a say and a sense of belonging. The digital world provides people with a new, virtual reality and identity. People take economic, political, social and cultural background of their citizenship, forming an e-citizenship<sup>2</sup>. This is especially characteristic for young people whose virtual life component represents increasingly important segment of their identity. For young people, citizen engagement in the life of community today represents an interaction between online and real world, allowing them to influence real world through online participation in the decision-making processes.

<sup>1</sup> [www.coe.int/en/web/compass/citizenship-and-participation#Forms%20of%20participation](http://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/citizenship-and-participation#Forms%20of%20participation)

<sup>2</sup> <http://virtualfeelsreal.org/en/field/citizenship-internet>

### 1.2. #e-Democracy and young people

Concept of electronic democracy (further mentioned as e-democracy) is defined as a use of information-communication tools in strengthening, promoting and alleviating democracy in the society. Importance of this concept lays in the fact that innovative ICT mechanisms and extremely fast exchange of information allowed for making a greater impact on two important aspects of democracy: in making informed and empowered citizens for participation in the life of community; and in allowing citizens to much easier and faster perform their roles of active citizens. Its importance is even greater in the demographic group of young people, not only because of virtual aspect of their lives but also because of the trend of decreasing the interest and participation of youth in the democratic, political and decision-making processes. Many surveys are suggesting that trust of young people in the democracy is in decrease which is reflected by low turnout of young people at the elections, political engagement or lack of knowledge on democratic procedures. Reasons for this situation young people mostly see in unadjusted approach offered by the institutions in this process and trust that their opinion will be respected and taken into account. Their willingness from the other side, if empowered and allowed, is high. Therefore, e-democracy is a concept that was recognized by young people as one which can increase youth participation in democracy and help them become active citizens.

### 1.3. #e-Participation and young people

Many people got confused when trying to differentiate e-democracy and e-participation, since participation is a word most commonly affiliated with e-democracy. However, it is important to made distinction in the form that e-participation is a segment, if not most significant one, of e-democracy. It is an online tool/mechanisms through which people can participate in democracy of their country or community. From the other side, e-democracy also includes segment of making people informed, educated and empowered using online tools for participation purposes. As already mentioned, such tools and mechanisms, if made properly, fit to a high degree to habits and interests of younger generations.

## Local stakeholders and their roles

Having functional e-democracy system on local level adjusted to young people, demand involvement of many local stakeholders. They have been separated into 3 groups by young people according to the different role they have in this process:

- **Public entities;**
- **Civil society organizations;**
- **Young people.**

Introducing this concept consists of informing, empowering and involving young people in the decision making and each stakeholder from the above mentioned perform one or several of those actions. Despite this, guide is primary made for local authorities. Explanation of the roles of different stakeholders will also help these institutions to better understand whom and how they can involve as a supportive factor in establishing youth friendly e-democracy.



### 2.1. Public entities

E-democracy is about involvement of citizens in shaping life of the community through official institutions, thus public entities, and especially local authorities, are the most important pillar for introducing this concept. In the light of youth friendly e-democracy, public entities on local level can be separated on **local authorities, youth offices and schools.**

**Local authorities** are stakeholder which have, from one side, to cover all actions mentioned above, and, from the other side, to ensure that capacities of all other stakeholders are used in the best possible manner. When it comes to informing, local authorities are representing a main source of public information, hence they need to ensure that all publicly important information are shared in the digestible way toward young people, meaning using youth friendly language and on the platforms that gathers young people. As already said, younger generations are reluctant to participate in the life of communities due to lack of trust in public institutions. Therefore, regaining this trust is important job that local authorities has to do. They need to empower young people to participate in the decision making by proving them importance and benefits of such action. Last but not the least, local authorities should provide youth friendly mechanisms for participation of young people on different levels that are going to be briefly elaborated in the following chapter of this guide.

**Youth offices** as public institutions in charge for youth issues are recognized as an actor which:

- Should be contact point between young people (through civil society organizations) and local authorities, in charge for ensuring that e-democracy approach is adjusted to young people;
- Provide knowledge and technical support to schools and civil society organizations in performing their role of doing democratic education of young people, their informing and empowering for participation.

Also, placed into category of public entities due to its legal nature, **schools** as a places when young people spend most of their time during the day and which has vital role in their education, should either through formal education curriculum or non-formal education activities be involved in democratic education of young people. Those who understand the way democracy is functioning stated to be more empowered to participate in democratic processes.

## 2.2. Civil society organizations

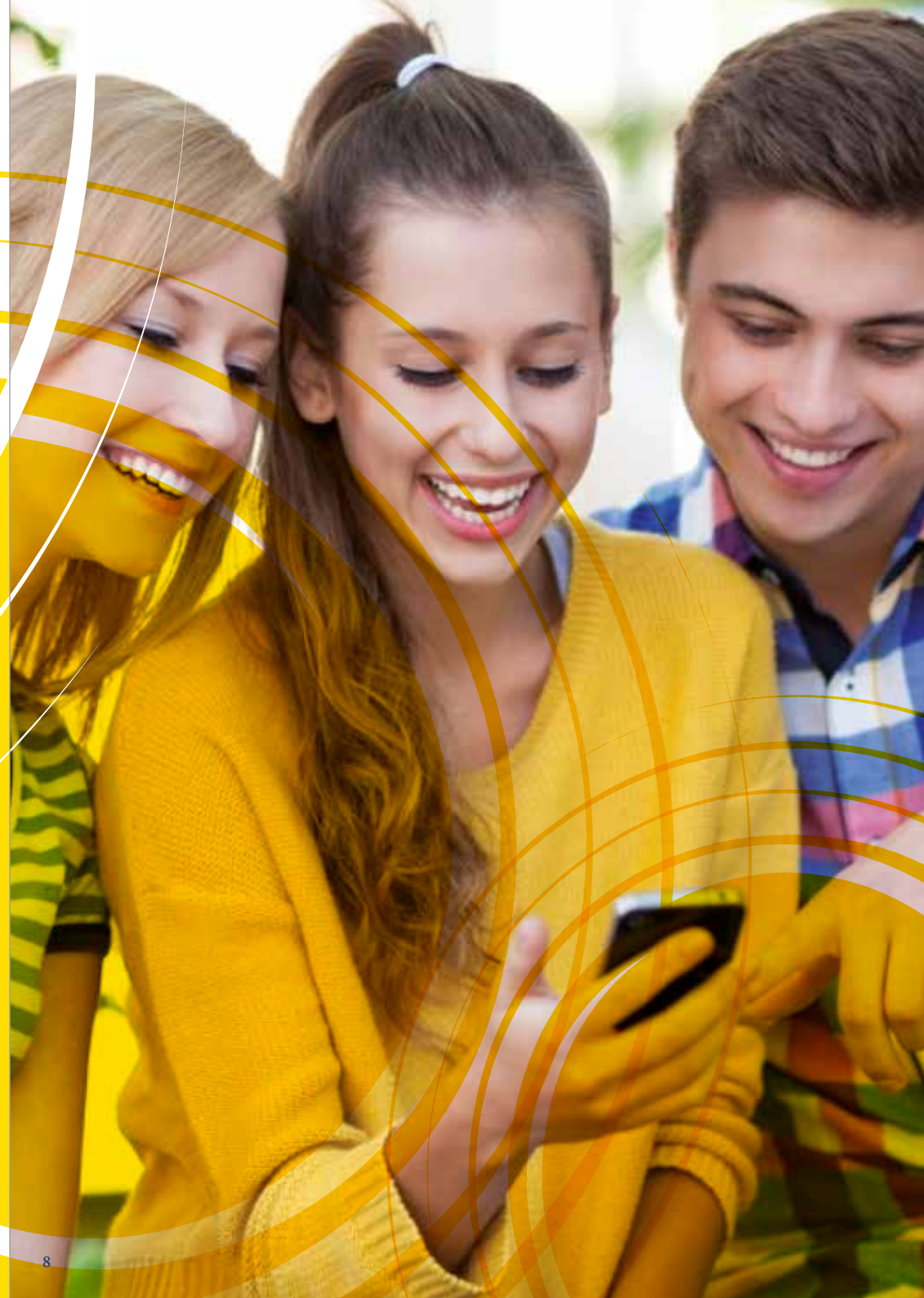
Like in many other social processes, civil society organizations have multiple role of:

- ▶ Educating/promoting;
- ▶ Oversight/control;
- ▶ Development/support.

While the last two are directed towards local authorities in this sense for making sure that youth e-democracy mechanisms are youth friendly, supporting them on that way, first one is directed towards young people. Civil society organizations have important role in educating young people with its expertise in non-formal education, thus local authorities should use their potential in establishing e-democracy. Since one of the cornerstones of democracy is right on the complete and true information, CSOs in this sense have control function in making sure that young people are rightly and fully informed before participating.

## 2.3. Young people

Besides being a main target group of this mechanism, young people are also representing a great potential for information sharing and peer empowerment. Today in the era of Internet and social networks that to a large degree shapes lives of young people, main source of informing among youth became “posts” on the profiles of their friends. This way young people easily, on one place, and very fast became updated with information and news. Thus, this potential can be used through viral Internet campaigns by local authorities as a way of making youth informed on decision making and democratic procedures. Also, peer empowerment could be used by local authorities to increase level of trust among young people and consequently increase level of their participation in decision making.



## Introducing e-democracy to young people

Designing e-participation mechanism and placing it on the web page of your local authority can hardly be considered as introducing e-democracy to young people on local level. Following technical instructions of how to do it will allow you to meet certain requirements, however usefulness and effectiveness of such instrument will remain on the very low level. Therefore, this guide isn't designed to provide only with instructions on how to create mechanism, but how to achieve meaningful creation of e-democracy strategy on local level that will be widely used by young people. On that road it is important to have comprehensive approach, meaning that you should:

- ▶ Create mechanism;
- ▶ Inform people about it;
- ▶ Empower them to get involved into democratic processes on local level;
- ▶ Educate them on democratic procedures and how to use mechanism;
- ▶ Involve them into decision making.

Also, it is important to be aware of different forms of youth engagement in decision-making processes, thus wisely use those forms to get most out of this.



### 3.1. Beyond the tool - informing, empowering and involving

As defined in the chapter "Glossary", e-democracy concept goes far beyond the creation of the e-participation mechanism. When you want to introduce recycling to young people, you can't just place garbage cans and expect from them to know how to do it and be aware of its importance, in the same way like can't provide them with education and awareness raising campaigns and do not provide them with infrastructure which will allow them to practice recycling. Hence, holistic approach that involve all of it is needed. Same goes with introduction of e-democracy to young people on local level.

This is primarily due to several problems that exist in this regard as targeted by various researches:

- ▶ Young people are not aware of their rights;
- ▶ Younger generations are not interested in politics;
- ▶ Trust in public institutions is on the low level;
- ▶ They are not familiar with the concept of e-participation;
- ▶ Public information is not easily accessible to them.


Having said this, if e-democracy concept for young people intends to have meaningful role in local community, it need to provide answer on all these problems.




First step here is to motivate and empower young people to take active role in their local community. To achieve this, young people need to be educated on the topics of democracy, political, democratic and decision-making processes in their country/local community, and to be aware of all rights and responsibilities that come out of their citizenship. This can be either integrated or emphasized through certain subjects that are integral part of formal education like civic education (this part varies from country to country), or either through non-formal education activities. For the latter, local authorities can find a great help from local youth offices or civil society organizations in your local community who have expertise in this field. Together, you can organize trainings, visits to public institutions, talk with local authority officials, have educative games and competitions among schools and neighborhoods, do simulations of decision-making processes, etc. Also, education processes should be followed with awareness raising campaigns, in the real and, especially, virtual world. Those campaigns should have engaging and interactive content that easily becomes widely viral, such as are, for example, challenges or inspirational peer videos, memes, gifs, etc.

However, empowerment process should not be forgotten after initial stage, it is a continuous process which also has its follow up. Integral part of empowerment are activities that share with young people sense of benefit after their participation. Therefore, after their involvement, no matter on which level, it is important to give feedback to young people such as:

- ▶ **Personalized thank you note;**
- ▶ **Share with them outcome of decision-making process;**
- ▶ **Provide them with certain benefits in local community, like prizes, discounts, etc.**

 When empowered, young people are informed about their rights and democratic processes. However, there are still some information missing. Second step here is to make them informed for participation and here we have two types of information:

1. **Information of public importance** – all information that are important for young people for the life in local community and for the decision-making process should be accessible to young people in youth friendly language, on the platforms they use, and without any possibility of misleading.
2. **Information on steps for participation** – all information that should guide young people from the moment they get information and invitation for participation, to the moment when their opinion or idea is submitted. This can be done through video tutorials and online games for example.

 When all these aspects are covered, you are only left with the task to involve young people into e-participation. This is covered in the following chapter, explaining different levels of participation and in which context they can be used.

### 3.2. Forms of e-participation

There are many ways through which forms of participation and e-participation are divided. However, intending to make it as simple as possible, young people recognized three most important forms which are differentiated on the ground of the level of young people involvement in the decision-making process using e-tools. Those are:

**e-Voting** – form of participation where young people using electronic means cast their vote on elections, vote for implementation of certain ideas or participate in the opinion polling;

**e-Consultation** – form of participation which is more complicated from the previous one due to fact that opinions from young people are collected in more open forms such as submission of opinion comments or participation at the online livestream consultation processes. These opinions are then collected and processed by the experts in the form of conclusions out of which certain action and initiatives can be taken;

**e-Initiative** – is the most comprehensive form of e-participation in which young people are generators of the content discussed online. Meaning that young people are those who are proposing certain idea to be implemented in local community and invite others to share their opinion, propose upgrade of idea and became its co-creators. This form often ends-up with petition in which certain number of signatures needs to be collected so that action can be initiated. This form of participation is highly important since it allows citizens to exercise their true potentials and creativity in community development and incite concrete outcomes out of it.





From the perspective of technical requirements these forms also can be divided into:

- **One-way communication** – form of e-participation in which opinions in the form of votes are automatically collected and processed by electronic machines, thus local authorities have a role as content initiator. e-Voting is a one-way form of communication;
- **Two-way communication** – form of e-participation which demands existence of the government “back end”, people who are in charge for content facilitation. Meaning that upon content initiating, either from their side or not, local authorities should be involved in facilitation of content discussion, so it provides more concrete results out of the process.

Speaking from the strategic point of view, when introducing youth friendly e-democracy to young people and having in mind all previously problems listed, local authorities should think of gradual implementation of such concept. This is especially due to reluctance to participate in the decision making and the fact that young people are unaware of the way how the process is functioning and whether something concrete will come out. Therefore, it is important first to involve young people into voting for certain ideas, voting for cultural program they would like to see in their community, open cinema projections they would like to watch, etc. Specially adjusted platforms for this first step are social media platforms and opinion poll options they have or use of many emoticons they are offering today on the posts. When young people have already been several times engage in such activities, then you can go step further and involve them in e-Consultation activities. Social media platforms can also play important role as a meeting point of young people where they often engage in discussions on certain issues of interest for them. To summarize, young people rather see social media platforms as a first step of e-participation, yet gradually done from least towards highest demanding engagement.



## From young people to local authorities Ideas for e-democracy and e-participation

Young people with their innovative and creative potential should represent very important pillar of local community development. Being digital natives and open minded, entitled them with capabilities to better understand social processes on local level and how it can be improved in more modern, efficient and easier way to fit concept of today's life and make surrounding sustainable in all aspects. However, in order to exploit this potential, young people need to have space to express themselves. They need to be empowered to actively shape life in local communities with its ideas. "Youthilize e-democracy" guide is a comprehensive tool of how to create such spaces made by young people, for local authorities that intend to involve them into democratic decision-making processes.

Up to this point guide have shared main elements of introducing e-democracy concept to young people on local level, including definitions, roles of various stakeholders in the process, problems that need to be addressed, various levels of participation in which young people can be involved and even some strategic approach to process of implementing e-democracy. Here, all these aspects are put together into examples of e-democracy systems for young people. However, each of these examples broader structures, needs to be adjusted to local context in order to be meaningful and effective.

### 4.1. YOUTHOUGHT

YouThought is an application designed to deliver youth thoughts to the decision makers in the local community. Applications are integral part of virtual life of young people. They used them to inform themselves, entertain and communicate, thus its usage in ensuring participation of young people into decision making can be very beneficial to local authorities. This application serves to address following problems:

- **Uninformed** – Young people are uninformed about the problems around them;
- **No voice** – Young people can hardly use their voices in helping to solve local community issues;
- **Not motivated** – Young people don't feel motivated to change problems around them.

This application consists of the following elements:

- ▶ Voting on important topics for young people;
- ▶ News made in a way easy understandable to youth;
- ▶ Petitions created by the young people;
- ▶ Personalized YouThought profiles.

⚙ Each young person will have to register to use app by creating its YouThought profile containing only most necessary data. It should be made in a way which represents their activist spirit and engagement, and easily linked with their profiles on social networks. These profiles should track records of their participation for which young people will be awarded with various benefits, depending from their level of participation, as well as virtual medals – bronze, silver, gold and platinum activist medal which could be entitled each month. Profile will contain sections about polls they participated in, petitions they created and/or participated, etc. Each setting needs to be adjustable by privacy settings.

⚙ Local authority, as application owner, will have a task to design all issues that matter to young people into easy understandable poll questions. Such questions will be delivered to all registered users of the application on which they will answer anonymously. When question is asked, each user will receive notification on the possibility for participation. Young people will be able to follow poll results and at the end of a poll, system will send them a thank you note for participation and let them know on the results and further implications of that decision.

⚙ News section will contain all news that matter to young people, written in a simple language. This can be done by establishing a voluntary journalistic section at the youth office of your local authority who are going to translate news on youth friendly language. Each news will also have a comment tread. Also, young people will be able to find list of all local organizations which are working with young people and open calls for their activities which can boost youth activist spirit even further.

⚙ As a way to express problems and solve issues, registered users will be able to create petitions according to the easy understandable set of steps that need to be fulfilled. Upon creation, each petition needs to be verified by local authority or explained reasons for its withdrawing. Those petitions should be easily sharable on social networks where young people can advocate for its signing. If a petition collects more than prescribed number of signatures, local authorities should take it into consideration on the municipal council and open discussion on it.

## 4.2. CHANGEMAKERS

Changemakers platform is a e-democracy concept that strive to create culture of participation on local level and influence policy and decision making by the local government officials. It represents combination of social networks and online platform, through linked personal profiles of users. Also, Changemakers should be a collaborative output of work of local authority and yoUTHILIZE youth council comprising of representatives of schools, student parliaments and civil society organizations that are dealing with this topic. Each stakeholder with its own role.

### How to make e-participation happen?

#### Step 1 – Put into work a Changemakers online platform

Create an online space linked to the official webpage of the local authority which consist of three elements:

- Give your vote;
- Your opinion matters;
- Incite change.

Each of these elements actually represents one level of participation of young people. At the section “Give your vote”, young people are invited to vote for or against certain proposals that are of importance or interest to youth in local community. “Your opinion matters” is a combination of forum and livestreaming sessions. Certain topics are posted by local authorities in this section upon which young people are invited to provide their opinion on the issue. Other option is a live public discussion using livestreaming where local government representatives engage into discussion with young people. Last element considers a place where young people can propose certain ideas to be implemented in local community for which local authorities need to be involved, consisting of two options – text of the idea with option to support it by signing as online petition, and forum for discussion moderated by the initiator of the idea, and supported by person in charge on behalf of local authority.

#### Step 2 – Start engines, come to young people first

Participation of young people only by creating some mechanism and inviting them will hardly ever happen. You need to inspire young people first. For this purpose, you can't invite young people, but go to young people – **join them on social media platforms.**

Create social media profiles of your platform on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and other relevant platforms to your local context and create your online community by gathering as much as possible young people.

**START SIMPLE.** Each of the platform elements can be simulated using social media tools. Thus, make your team create some light questions for young people that are easy to understand, such as – “what movie out of following you would like to see at our film festival?” and put them on voting on those platforms using option “polls”. Ask young people what they think about certain question by posting it and allow for commenting or just simply to react on post using some of the offered emoticons. Create a livestreaming sessions on the pages where local government representatives answer on young people's questions and comments. Make online contest for some ideas to be submitted by young people in some of the fields which you, as local authority, recognize that is important for inspiring them to incite change.

By repeating this many times, throughout certain period, you will make young people to feel sense of benefit of participating in local community. Thus, their transfer at later stage to the Changemakers platform for involving them into policy decision making will be more effective and easier. Also, you should create empowerment and information sharing online campaigns to follow this process.

#### Step 3 – Meet them face to face

Do not forget live interaction moment. Meeting young people in person and empowering them using creative ideas to become active citizens is equally important as previous two steps. For this purposes, yoUTHILIZE youth council should be put into work, allowing them to create trainings, simulations, voting in schools for certain ideas, competitions between schools or parliaments, quizzes, etc.

#### Step 4 – Make them feel benefits

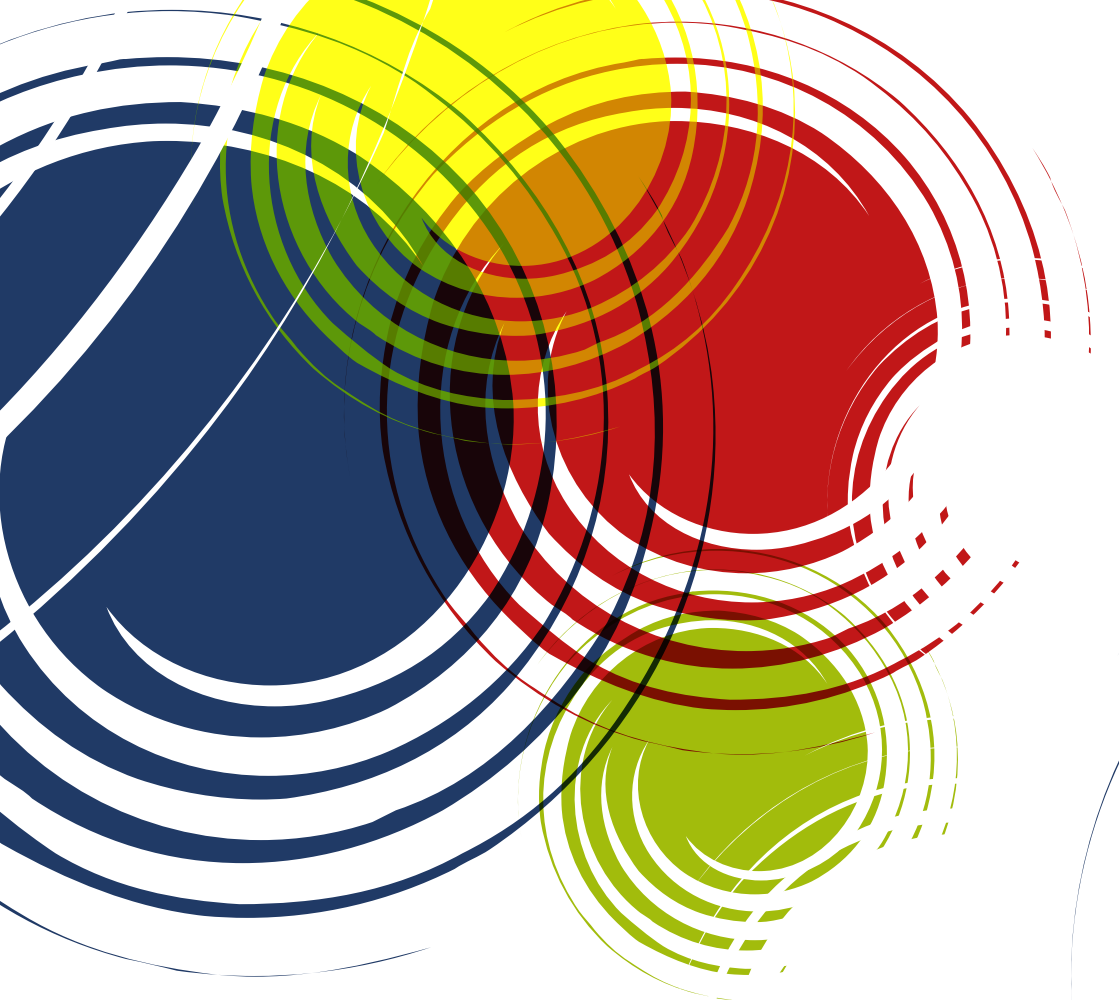
Young people often feel that their opinion is not appreciated and problem when people judge their opinion by their age is something they are facing all over Europe. Once they make first step of being active citizens and start participating, let them know about the importance of their opinion. Send them a thank you note for participation, share with them results from the polls, give them prizes, invite them to join you at some discussions or to present some ideas in person, etc.

## Conclusion

Today, when innovation is shaping life around the world, our economies, environment and living standards, governments are expected to create spaces that will boost that citizens potential and allow them to decide how their surrounding is going to look like. With its two most important elements – creative thinking and use of new technologies, innovation is pointing finger into young people; saying to local governments who is a key to making communities better places to live in and according to imagination of its people. However, lack of participatory environment adjusted to younger generations made them became reluctant to even try to shape life in their community. They don't feel empowered to try to say how they see their local community, often going down the easier path of giving a blind eye or even fleeing from their places.

Concept of e-democracy aroused as perfect solution to meet such needs local communities has. It allowed for creation of spaces where in a much easier and more efficient way young people can get involved in sharing vision of their communities and contributing with their opinion and ideas toward community development. Despite existence of such approaches around the Europe, youth participation remained at low levels due to unadjusted and incomprehensible approach toward young people. Thus, in order to change that, e-democracy needs to be shaped according to the needs and habits of young people, needs to be shaped as seen by them. Local authorities shouldn't invite young people, they need to come to young people. Join them on the places where they are spending most of the time online and through processes of education, information-sharing and empowerment made them active citizens in their local community. They need to make their thinking a most valuable asset for local development. And they can do so only if we **YOUTHILIZE e-democracy**.





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