



ParticipACTION

Desk review findings on the level of awareness, gaps in knowledge and barriers to civic participation among young people in **France**



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FRANCE

Findings from the Desk Review on the level of awareness, gaps in knowledge, and barriers to participation amongst young people in civic democratic life and decision-making processes in France and Europe. Conducted by Place Network.



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The ParticipACTION Project

The **ParticipACTION** “*Building Inclusive Civic Engagement and Solidarity Among Diverse Young People in Europe*” project is co-funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Program (CERV-2023-CITIZENS-CIV).

The project’s core aims to enhance youth engagement in European decision-making processes and create opportunities for young people to connect with policymakers at local, national, and European levels through research initiatives, roundtables, workshops, and training sessions on policy and advocacy. The project targets young people aged 16 to 23. It seeks to involve not only European citizens but also young individuals with migratory backgrounds or coming from non-EU countries, with a special focus on women and girls. By bringing together these diverse groups of young people, the project aims to foster mutual understanding of shared experiences and barriers to democratic participation, ultimately promoting solidarity. The goal of the project is to equip young people with the tools to influence EU democratic processes, while promoting a bottom-up approach that ensures their lived realities are at the heart of policy decisions.

The ParticipAction project is implemented in Italy, France, Cyprus and Lithuania by a consortium of five experienced partners. The project runs from October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2026.

Project Partners

IRC Italia – Fondazione International Rescue Committee Italia ETS – Coordinator (Italy)

G.F.C. - Generation For Change CY - (Cyprus)

PLACE - PLACE Network - (France)

GLOCAL FACTORY - GLOCAL FACTORY Società Cooperativa Sociale - (Italy)

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1. Introduction

This desk review report (D1.1) has been conducted building on the analysis at the proposal stage by PLACE Network on the level of awareness, gaps in knowledge and barriers to participation amongst young people from diverse backgrounds in civic democratic life and decision-making processes in France and Europe. The present national-level review serves as a foundational analysis of youth engagement in France concerning EU institutions, policies, and democratic processes. It includes a scan of the EU policies available and any existing solidarity mechanisms in the EU related to the three themes selected by young people in WP2.

By systematically mapping existing knowledge, participation levels, and the barriers encountered by young people, including Third Country Nationals (TCNs hereafter) this desk review establishes the groundwork for the subsequent phases of ParticipACTION. The findings presented herein will be supplemented by primary data gathered from Focus Group Discussions and Surveys (D1.3) and findings from the national roundtables conducted in WP3 and will result in the National Level Assessment reports (D3.1).

France, as a diverse and multicultural society, presents a particularly interesting context for studying youth civic engagement. The country's rich history of political activism, coupled with contemporary challenges related to social inequalities, structural racism, and rising populism, shapes the landscape of youth participation in distinctive ways. This desk review examines the levels of civic knowledge and engagement among young people in France, with a particular focus on the intersectional impact of identity factors such as gender, migration status, and socio-economic background. It explores how these factors affect young people's awareness of democratic processes and their participation in political decision-making, both at the national and European Union levels.

2. Knowledge

In France, awareness of European Union (EU hereafter) institutions and policies among youth remains a mixed picture. While a portion of the youth population is aware of the EU's existence, a deeper understanding of how EU institutions, such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Council of the European Union, function and influence legislation is limited. Eurobarometer surveys indicate that, while young people in France may have general knowledge

of the EU's existence, many struggle to identify the specific roles these institutions play in decision-making processes that affect their daily lives, particularly in terms of economic, social, and environmental policies. According to the 2021 Eurobarometer report, approximately 58% of young French people have a basic understanding of EU institutions, but fewer are able to identify their concrete impact on national policy-making (European Commission, 2021). Furthermore, while some youth are aware of EU programs like Erasmus+ and youth mobility initiatives, their knowledge of broader EU policies such as the Green Deal or digital transformation is often superficial. According to a report by France Stratégie (2020), youth from marginalized backgrounds, such as migrant youth or those from lower socio-economic classes, are particularly disengaged from EU policies, resulting in a significant gap in knowledge across different demographic groups.

Between 2019 and 2022, young people in France (18-30) increasingly identify as European citizens, with 60% feeling connected to the EU, compared to 55% identifying as global citizens. Their perception of the EU has become more positive, particularly in terms of economic power and solidarity, with 59% supporting further European integration. Education and income strongly influence EU support, with higher levels linked to more favorable views and greater EU knowledge (INJEP, 2019).

A 2022 representative survey of 4,512 youth in 2022 revealed a shift towards more positive EU associations. Solidarity, cooperation, and democracy were seen more positively, while negative perceptions such as 'complexity' and 'decline' diminished. Despite this shift, EU knowledge remains limited, with 72% of respondents answering 1-4 out of 9 EU-related questions correctly. Those with higher education, better income, and a positive EU view demonstrated greater knowledge (Hoibian & Müller, 2022).

The study "*Young adult voters' civic engagement in the Paris region*" found a clear relationship between political knowledge and participation. Youth with greater political knowledge are more likely to engage in conventional political activities. However, this benefit is not uniformly distributed, with disparities based on socio-economic status, ethnicity, and migratory background. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority groups, particularly those of Arab, Berber, or African descent, are less likely to engage in civic activities, especially non-conventional forms of participation. These disparities are compounded by systemic barriers to accessing information and resources, as well as cultural perceptions that discourage engagement. Gender also influences participation patterns, with girls generally more involved in social movements and discussions compared to boys, whose engagement declines in less supportive educational environments (LaRue Allen et al., 2016).

The "*Young People's Relationship with the European Union: A Literature Review*" report notes that while younger generations consistently exhibit higher levels of support for the EU compared to older demographics, this does not always translate into active engagement. The report also highlights that rising populism and political disenchantment, compounded by socio-economic inequalities, present significant barriers.

Euroscepticism among young people in France has been on the rise in recent years, with many young individuals expressing doubts about the EU's ability to address their concerns or reflect their interests. While support for European integration remains relatively strong, particularly in the areas of economic cooperation and solidarity, there is a growing sense of disillusionment with the EU's perceived complexity, bureaucracy, and detachment from local realities. A 2021 study by the European Parliament found that young people in France were increasingly skeptical of the EU's political and economic direction, particularly in the context of rising populism and economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This skepticism is often rooted in the belief that the EU is an elitist institution that prioritizes the interests of powerful member states and institutions over those of the younger, marginalized populations (European Parliament, 2021).

While French youth acknowledge the benefits of EU membership, such as opportunities for mobility and educational programs like Erasmus+, they are also critical of the EU's handling of pressing issues like youth unemployment, climate change, and social inequality. Eurosceptic sentiments are particularly pronounced among youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority groups, who often feel excluded from the political and economic benefits of EU membership. This disenchantment with the EU is compounded by a wider distrust of political institutions, which has been increasingly visible in the rise of populist and anti-establishment movements across Europe.

The relationship between Euroscepticism and political engagement is complex, as disillusionment with the EU does not always correlate with a lack of political participation. In some cases, young people who feel disconnected from the EU may turn to national or local political movements, which offer them a more immediate sense of agency and relevance. However, this shift towards local or national political participation also reflects the broader challenge facing EU institutions in connecting with younger generations and addressing their concerns in a meaningful way. For young people, particularly those from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds, the EU's relevance is often questioned in the face of more pressing issues, such as employment, inequality, and national political instability (Hoibian & Müller, 2022).

3. Participation

Youth political participation in France presents a complex and evolving landscape, with a clear distinction between national and EU engagement. While young people generally express support for the EU, this does not necessarily translate into active participation in EU processes. According to Eurobarometer surveys, youth voter turnout in the 2014 European elections was significantly lower than older demographics, with only 27.8% of Europeans aged 18–24 voting, compared to over 50% of older voters (Eurobarometer, 2014).

In the June 2024 European elections, voter turnout in France was 40% among 18-24-year-olds and 35% among 25-34-year-olds, compared to 71% among those aged 70 and over, highlighting a lower participation rate among young voters (Usbek & Rica, 2024).

However, there is an increasing trend toward youth involvement in non-conventional political activities such as activism, volunteering, and participation in social movements. This shift indicates that many young people prefer informal, issue-based forms of civic engagement over traditional electoral participation. These alternative avenues of political participation are particularly prevalent among youth who seek direct action rather than engaging with formal political structures (Mercenier, 2019).

The study by LaRue Allen, Berg, and Bang (2016) in the Paris region further supports this shift, revealing that young people with higher political knowledge are more likely to engage in conventional political activities such as voting. However, participation is uneven across different social groups, with youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and migrant communities facing significant barriers. These disparities are compounded by limited access to civic education and political participation opportunities, as well as systemic obstacles like social discrimination and economic constraints. The research emphasizes that marginalized groups, such as young people of migrant origin, often lack the resources and support needed to engage fully in democratic life (LaRue Allen et al., 2016).

In France, national strategies aimed at fostering youth participation, such as the *National Youth Strategy 2019-2022*, include a focus on enhancing civic education and encouraging youth involvement in volunteering and social initiatives. The *European Commission* notes that youth volunteering is a key mechanism for engaging young people in social and civic activities. The French government supports various initiatives to promote volunteering, recognizing its role in developing civic skills and fostering community engagement (European Commission, 2020). Volunteering opportunities, particularly through *Service Civique*, are seen as essential to encouraging young people to participate in democratic processes outside the traditional political

framework. However, access to these programs is not equally distributed, with marginalized youth, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or migrant communities, facing challenges in accessing volunteering opportunities (INJEP, 2019).

Despite these efforts, gaps remain in integrating TCNs into youth political participation initiatives. Legal frameworks designed to support the inclusion of migrant-origin youth in civic life are often insufficient, leaving many young migrants without the necessary support to participate fully. In addition, practical barriers such as racism, xenophobia, and socio-economic inequalities further restrict engagement. Negative stereotypes, such as the perception of youth as politically apathetic or migrants as unqualified, exacerbate these challenges (Mercenier, 2019). These barriers underline the need for more targeted policies that ensure inclusive participation, especially for disadvantaged groups like young women and migrants.

Greater coordination between national and EU-level initiatives, as well as more accessible programs, would help create a more inclusive framework for youth participation in democratic life (INJEP, 2019).

4. Barriers

Barriers to the civic engagement of TCNs and marginalized youth in France stem from a combination of legal, structural, and societal factors. Despite the existence of policies aimed at promoting youth civic participation, their implementation remains inconsistent, particularly concerning TCNs. National strategies often prioritize civic education, but the effectiveness of these programs varies significantly, and they frequently exclude non-EU migrants, resulting in disparities in political representation and participation. According to the Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l'Éducation Populaire (INJEP, 2019), while civic education is a critical tool for fostering engagement, many national curricula are designed with native-born citizens in mind, leaving migrant youth without structured opportunities to learn about their political rights and how to participate effectively in civic life. This lack of targeted educational support contributes to a low level of awareness and limited engagement among TCNs, further perpetuating their political marginalization. (INJEP, 2019)

Legal barriers are also significant. Many TCNs lack voting rights, excluding them from formal political structures and limiting their ability to influence decision-making processes. This exclusion is compounded by administrative and bureaucratic hurdles that prevent TCNs from participating in local governance, policy discussions, and other civic initiatives (Mercenier, 2019).

Furthermore, the 2004 law banning the wearing of religious symbols, including the hijab in public schools, directly impacts young Muslim women from migrant backgrounds, reinforcing the exclusionary environment they face within educational and public spaces. This law, coupled with the lack of policies promoting inclusive participation for migrant youth, creates a legal framework that inhibits their civic engagement (Amnesty International, 2020).

Beyond legal constraints, practical barriers such as racism, xenophobia, and racial profiling further obstruct TCNs' participation in civic life. Migrant youth, especially those of Arab, Berber, and African descent, face discriminatory scrutiny, including "*contrôles au faciès*" (identity checks based on physical appearance), which undermines their trust in state institutions. This practice, coupled with instances of police violence and brutality, alienates these communities from the democratic process, making them hesitant to participate in protests or demonstrations for fear of legal repercussions or further harassment. Unaccompanied minors face particular discrimination, with many being criminalized by the legal system rather than being recognized for their vulnerability, which further alienates them from the civic process. (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Furthermore, migrants and youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds often struggle with economic instability, making political engagement a secondary concern. The scarcity of resources and opportunities to access civic education and political networks further entrenches these communities' marginalization from public life (Mercenier, 2019). Gendered expectations also play a role in hindering participation, particularly for migrant women. These women often face dual discrimination—racial and gender-based—limiting their visibility and participation in political spaces. Cultural norms frequently position women as "calm and nurturing," discouraging them from asserting themselves in political activities (INJEP, 2019). Additionally, the lack of migrant women in leadership roles and the absence of strong role models further exacerbate their exclusion from the political sphere. This intersection of racism, sexism, and classism creates compounded barriers that discourage many migrant women from engaging in political and civic life (LaRue Allen et al., 2016).

Stereotypes, such as the portrayal of young migrants as "unqualified" or "uncooperative," and the widespread notion of "political apathy" among youth, further contribute to their exclusion from political participation. These negative stereotypes marginalize migrant youth's concerns and reinforce the belief that they are not entitled to a say in policymaking (INJEP, 2019). This exclusionary environment discourages TCNs and marginalized youth from engaging in public life, perpetuating a cycle of disengagement that undermines their political agency.

5. Scan of EU policies

As part of the ParticipACTION project, two interactive seminar sessions were held in Paris on February 9 and March 9, 2025, targeting 28 young people aged 16-23, particularly young migrant women and TCNs. During these seminars, participants selected three key themes for analysis: “Education, Culture, Youth & Sport”; “Migration”; and “Values, Rights, Rule of Law & Security”. The sessions aimed to enhance participants' understanding of these themes, examining relevant EU policies and solidarity mechanisms while considering their implementation in the French context.

5.1 Education, Culture, Youth & Sport

The EU remains committed to promoting education, youth participation, culture, and sport as key pillars for social inclusion and democratic engagement. Erasmus+, the EU’s flagship education and youth mobility program, has been allocated nearly €5 billion for 2025, reinforcing its role in fostering cross-border exchanges, skills development, and civic engagement among young Europeans (EU Neighbours East, 2024). In France, Erasmus+ participation is high, with over 50,000 students and young professionals benefitting annually (Agence Erasmus+ France, 2024).

France also implements EU initiatives such as the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), which supports youth volunteering and civic engagement.

Additionally, the EU Work Plan for Sport (2024–2027) emphasizes integrity, inclusion, sustainability, and the socio-economic value of sports (Sport et Citoyenneté, 2024). These initiatives illustrate the EU’s commitment to ensuring equal opportunities for young people across diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. However, challenges remain in ensuring equal access to mobility programs for disadvantaged youth, particularly migrants and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

5.2 Migration

The EU’s migration policies have undergone significant shifts in 2024–2025, focusing on border control, asylum procedures, and return mechanisms. The newly proposed European Return System aims to streamline and accelerate deportations of irregular migrants (European Commission, 2025). The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in May 2024, introduces new screening and detention rules at EU borders, raising concerns about potential human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2025). National governments have also tightened border controls and asylum policies, at times contradicting international refugee protections. These policies illustrate

the EU's increasing focus on security-driven migration management, but they also exacerbate barriers to integration and limit opportunities for migrant youth to participate in civic life.

In 2024, the French government passed a new immigration law that tightens asylum procedures and expands detention policies. These measures mirror EU-wide trends of securitization and border control, often at the expense of migrant rights.

France has also been criticized for its treatment of unaccompanied minors. A Human Rights Watch report (2018) documented the arbitrary denial of child protection services in Paris, while Amnesty International has denounced the criminalization of migrant youth. In March 2025, French authorities evacuated the Gaîté Lyrique theater in Paris, which had been occupied by Unaccompanied Migrant Children since December 2024, resulting in 46 arrests.

5.3 Values, Rights, Rule of Law & Security

The EU upholds a strong commitment to democratic values and fundamental rights, which are enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2009), legally binding since the Lisbon Treaty. These values—human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights—are integral to the EU's legal framework. EU citizens enjoy rights such as freedom of movement and residence across Schengen states, as well as the right to vote and run for office in European Parliament elections. In France, while these EU principles are foundational, the country has faced increasing criticism for democratic backsliding and human rights violations, which have often been in tension with the EU's overarching values.

However, laws like the Global Security Law and the surveillance projects related to the 2024 Paris Olympics raise concerns about balancing security with public freedoms. The use of intrusive technologies to prevent terrorist threats may infringe on privacy and freedom of expression, sparking debates at both the national and European levels.

In addition to concerns over freedom of expression, France's security policies have drawn significant attention, especially in the context of protests. The use of excessive police force against demonstrators, particularly those from racialized and marginalized backgrounds, has been widely documented. These security concerns are exacerbated by France's intensification of security measures, especially in the context of immigration and public order, which often overshadow the EU's emphasis on human rights.



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At the EU level, the Pact on Migration and Asylum (2024) aims to address the complex relationship between security and migration. It seeks to balance the protection of external borders with the fair treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, ensuring that member states uphold their international obligations while also securing their borders. France's implementation of these policies, however, has often faced criticism, particularly regarding its treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, which is seen as inconsistent with the EU's core principles of human dignity and equality.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the current state of youth awareness and participation in EU institutions and policies in France highlights both progress and significant challenges. The following points summarize the key findings and barriers influencing youth engagement.

- Youth awareness of EU institutions and policies in France is mixed. While a general understanding exists, deeper knowledge of the functioning and impact of these institutions, especially on daily life and policy-making, is limited, particularly among marginalised youth.
- Support for the EU among young French people is relatively strong and has become more positive, especially concerning economic power and solidarity. However, there is a growing sense of disillusionment with the EU's perceived complexity and detachment from local realities, with rising Euroscepticism linked to concerns about its ability to address their issues.
- A clear relationship exists between political knowledge and participation, with greater knowledge correlating with more engagement in conventional political activities. However, this benefit is not evenly distributed, with disparities based on socio-economic status, ethnicity, and migratory background, leading to lower participation among marginalised youth.
- Youth political participation in France is evolving, with a notable shift towards non-conventional forms of engagement such as activism, volunteering, and social movements, particularly among those seeking direct action.
- Significant barriers hinder the civic engagement of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) and marginalised youth. These include legal limitations such as voting rights, structural issues like a lack of targeted civic education and limited access to opportunities, and societal factors such as racism, xenophobia, negative stereotypes, and economic instability.
- EU policies in areas like Education, Culture, Youth & Sport, notably through Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, aim to foster youth participation and inclusion. However, challenges persist in ensuring equal access to these programs for disadvantaged youth, including migrants and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- EU migration policies are increasingly focused on border control, asylum procedures, and return mechanisms. This securitization trend, mirrored in French national policies, can exacerbate barriers to integration and limit opportunities for civic participation among migrant youth, raising concerns about human rights.
- While the EU upholds democratic values and fundamental rights, there are concerns regarding France's implementation in areas such as security measures and the treatment of



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migrants, which have faced criticism for potentially conflicting with these core EU principles.

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requis au maintien d'une participation civique et politique meme logique pour les jeunes de la majorite et immigrants).