

## DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

# Is there a real youth democratic disconnect?

## Insights into youth political participation in Southeast Europe

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A group of boys play basketball on a court covered in ultranationalist Serbian murals in the northern city of Mitrovica, Kosovo. In this Serb-majority area, the northern part does not recognize the Kosovo government, and the Kosovo government is increasingly restricting the rights of Serbs. Photo by Carles Palacio

We are used to thinking of young people as a force for democratic change. But youth research over the last decade has pointed to a gloomier picture – fewer and fewer young people are politically engaged worldwide. This is certainly true at least when it comes to conventional tools for democratic participation, such as political party membership, voter turnout and electoral support for major parties, all of which have been marked by decline over the past decade. The costs of such a “youth democratic disconnect” are immense and could become one of the greatest dangers of our times. If youngsters are absent from crucial decisions that determine their future, democratic legitimacy as a whole is put under question. Given the importance of youth participation for the health of democratic citizenship, there are fears that such a decline in youth political engagement may inevitably end in a crisis of democracy itself.

Research has underlined the main factors that influence youth participation: labour market

conditions, education, institutional participation, level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, level of trust in political institutions in general, economic crisis and associated austerity policies. [1] Challenges to good governance and attacks on democracy intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, placing even more pressure on young people. The situation worsened with the accumulation of crises, and most recently with the insecurity produced by the tectonic shift in global geopolitics that resulted from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the war in Gaza from October 2023.

In this tense context, the region of Southeast Europe [2] deserves special attention. The region has experienced ambivalent political transformations in recent years, but negative aspects such as backsliding democracy, illiberalism and so-called “stabilitocracy” have dominated experts’ accounts. Predictably, disillusionment and political apathy among the young people of Southeast Europe is a response to these trends, even though their situation is far more complex. On the one hand, young people are one of the most vulnerable social groups in Southeastern European countries, significantly affected by the legacy of past conflicts, poverty, delayed transitions to democracy and even by populist and autocratic tendencies. On the other hand, they are at the forefront of innovation, using creative and unconventional methods of political engagement, being disruptive, raising their voices against the establishment and fighting against anti-democratic actors. So how in fact have the young people of Southeastern European countries been engaging with their democracies in recent years?

Young people are one of the most vulnerable groups in southeastern Europe, affected by the legacy of past conflicts and poverty

Despite the fact that emigration intentions are sky-rocketing in the region, with the resulting rising levels of brain drain, the youth of Southeast Europe have also shown willingness to defend democracy and even get involved in democratic change in their home countries. This analysis will try to explore this paradox and offer a general overview of the main trends in youth political participation in Southeast Europe.

## Youth disillusionment – a global trend?

We identify as young people all individuals aged between 18 and 30 (the age range generally used by the European Social Survey). In Southeast Europe, there are contrasting views on the exact scope of this age group, ranging from 15 to 24 or 35 years. Beyond these formal elements, there is one undeniable fact that all expert reports confirm: massive youth disengagement from politics.

Youth political participation includes various activities such as voting; membership of political parties, national youth councils and youth organisations; volunteering and participation in global movements and protests; or, most recently, the climate strike movement. But youth participation has changed and adapted to the new digital era.

Unfortunately, youth empowerment in democratic governance is also affected by class, race and gender discrimination. People under the age of 35 are rarely found in formal political leadership positions. The same applies to members of minority groups such as Roma or young women, with an even wider gap between urban and rural areas. And the situation is even more difficult for women or members of the queer community, as most political parties are male dominated and still very few women are seen in mid-level and decision-making or leadership positions.

Young people all over the world share a feeling of disillusionment with mainstream politics. This has manifested in either creative and disruptive ways such as the “Occupy” movement during the global economic crisis after 2010, or by total public silence – youth absenteeism from voting and overall political apathy. Therefore, the decline in youth political participation is a worrying global phenomenon that presents high risks capable of affecting the quality of our democratic life. Connected also with the effects of globalisation, youth disillusionment has been visible in Southeast Europe for many years. [3] Traditionally, young people in Southeast Europe have been politically active in universities, but they are very often disillusioned with political leaders and institutions, and are excluded from policy development. As a result, political activism among young people is not organised according to formal groupings. Youth in the region have remained politically active through “political movements” instead of engaging with and in political parties.

Of course, the youth in this region face certain specific challenges compared to other regions. Various opinion polls over the years have shown that, more so than other demographic groups, young people in Southeast Europe are alarmingly dissatisfied with the state of democracy in their home countries. [4] But this is not the full picture.

We need to give more consideration to their context. Youth participation was directly impacted by the series of global and regional crises suffered by the region. First, the economic crisis of 2008, with its strict austerity measures that affected youth quality of life, such as being able to afford a good education, buy a house, or find and secure a well-paid job. The countries of Southeast Europe were already affected by poverty and high unemployment rates, but the crisis hit especially hard for young people, who became one of the main vulnerable groups in terms of purchasing power. [5] Economic insecurities exploded in countries that already faced numerous problems such as underdevelopment, corruption and lack of social welfare systems.

Next, these growing insecurities exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant economic effect. Moreover, the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation spreading panic found young people as a category particularly vulnerable to fake news. These aspects, combined with the social isolation and loss of jobs produced by the pandemic, have affected young people more than other categories of people, driving them to increased use of the internet and digital communication, and leading to chronic addiction to social media. This overexposure to online communication over the last few years has also affected youth mental health, with chronic depression and suicidal thoughts on the rise. This is also an important aspect to take into consideration in relation to youth participation, because the excessive use of social networks, social isolation and depression

have made young people vulnerable to online radicalisation and exposed them to extremist narratives that have affected their behaviour, both on- and offline.

Excessive use of social networks and isolation have made young people vulnerable to online radicalisation and exposed them to extremist discourse

Among the many challenges of youth participation during the COVID-19 pandemic were also the backlashes from reactionary, anti-state populist movements, which started to attract more youth in the so-called “anti-vaccine” street protests. Under the banner of protecting democracy, these protests in fact posed challenges to the current democratic order. This was a good reminder that not all forms of youth political involvement are useful for the democratic debate, especially not when driven by disinformation and conspiracy theories.

## Specific obstacles to youth political participation in Southeast Europe

The demographic trend in Southeast Europe is more youthful than in the “ageing” EU. Demographic data in Southeastern European countries show that the average age is significantly lower, in fact, the region has one of the youngest populations in Europe. This is both good and bad news at the same time. As experts argue, although young people represent great growth potential for the region, they are also the most exposed to structural vulnerabilities such as emigration and brain drain towards EU countries.

Moreover, a toxic mix of social, political and economic turmoil in Southeast Europe over the last three decades has definitely affected young people. The generations born in the mid-1990s and 2000s grew up to become citizens in very turbulent social circumstances. In the ex-Yugoslav countries, young people were confronted with the negative consequences of the wars between 1991 and 1999, ethno-nationalist rhetoric, poverty, insecurity, forced migration and separation from their families, all of which would later contribute to two very different trends – either increased political apathy, or political anger and increased interest in taking action against political elites that do not represent their interests. Youth from other post-communist countries faced specific challenges. Being raised and socialised in an environment of prolonged transition to democracy, young people in Southeast Europe are alarmingly dissatisfied with the state of democracy in their home countries.

It is important to acknowledge that there were specific obstacles that hindered young people’s participation in this area, both at the collective and the individual level, and I will shortly mention some of these. A growing number of young people have little trust in formal political processes, political institutions and leaders, perhaps because they feel these are not representative of their interests. Serious barriers to youth involvement in governance



were driven by limited access to education, low number of employment opportunities, poor healthcare, and lack of public transportation and social protection services.



A young man takes a selfie at a protest in front of the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia against confinement measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, July 2020. Photo: Mitar Mitrovic

Moreover, the long series of political, economic and social crises over the last decade also produced political instability, contested elections, threats of secession and revival of war rhetoric together with rising authoritarian trends. These worrying evolutions left most of the main decisions in the hands of party politics, reducing media freedom and funding for non-governmental actors. In Southeast Europe, political parties have tended to act as “gatekeepers” of elected positions, deciding who will be placed on their candidate lists and in which position. Unfortunately, the nomination processes have not always favoured young candidates or women. So most of the national parliaments in these countries have low numbers of young people or women, although this situation has started to improve in recent years.

Among the main challenges for youth in post-conflict environments such as Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo or North Macedonia is young people’s exclusion from important matters of policy making. Predictably, this phenomenon was evident in the first decade after the wars ended, but continues to this day in different proportions, often intertwined with other forms of marginalisation linked to gender, location, culture and/or ethnic identity. Among the byproducts of this exclusion and feeling of marginalisation in public life shared by many

young people in Southeast Europe are radicalisation and violent extremism. [6] This remains a huge problem, especially in the Western Balkans, a region that is still affected by the consequences of recent conflicts and growing ethno-nationalist extremism. [7]

Increasing political polarisation and stagnating EU accession processes have had a devastating impact on youth political participation in the Western Balkans

Furthermore, disillusionment with national institutions and the EU, combined with high emigration rates, has led some of the countries of Southeast Europe to a real “demographic disaster”. [8] For the countries of the Western Balkans in particular (ex-Yugoslav and Albania), increasing political polarisation and frequent political deadlocks in EU accession processes over the past decade have had a detrimental effect on youth political participation. These events have lowered youth trust in political institutions.

## Different forms of political engagement – disruptive civic and digital activism

Southeast Europe as a region has largely been portrayed as having “weak” civil societies and scant civic participation, in many cases mostly donor driven. Research has actually pointed out that, in many of the countries in the region, there has been a wealth of alternative activism over the last decade, largely outside professional non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Authoritarian trends in the region have been seriously challenged by non-traditional forms of political engagement through contestation such as grassroots citizen initiatives, ranging from street protests to political campaigns that in some cases have even led to the creation of electoral platforms.

So not all young people in the region are marked by political apathy. Experts often underline that we are not always looking in the right direction when discussing meaningful youth political actions. In recent years, numerous political events have allowed us to witness the willingness of Southeastern European youth to be agents of democratic change. In recent years, young people from the 11 countries of the region have engaged in containing democratic decline, but not through traditional tools. Instead, they have preferred civil society activism, which has become much more popular than being active in politics.

The decline in participation is real, but it has occurred mainly in traditional forms of participation. In Southeast Europe, as in other regions, young people have been publicly active using alternative means of engagement such as petitions, street protests and Fridays for Future community actions over the traditional act of voting or campaigning for a political party. What is even more interesting is that they have changed the place of their engagement, replacing the traditional youth wings of political parties or labour unions with

non-governmental organisations or independent citizen initiatives using *guerilla* marketing messages to attract public attention to their concerns. These should be the new ways to measure youth participation, through the impact of their actions rather than their numbers.

Among these unconventional instruments of political participation was the culture of protest that involved mostly young people in Southeast Europe as a tide of nonviolent youth movements swept across Southeast Europe. In the 2010s, numerous mass protest waves occurred in many cities across the region: in Zagreb in 2011 and 2015; in Maribor and Ljubljana in 2012; in Skopje in 2016; in Belgrade and other Serbian cities in 2017 and 2019; in Bucharest in 2017 and 2018; and in Sofia in 2020-2021. [9] For many, this trend began long before with the Serbian social movement Otpor (Resistance), which involved many students and young people in general, and played a vital role in bringing down Slobodan Milosevic in 2000.

Another non-traditional tool of youth participation used in Southeast Europe is the popular street activism of young people in the climate movement. A good example is #FridaysForFuture, the youth-led and youth-organised movement set in motion by Greta Thunberg in August 2018. Youth from all the 11 countries of Southeast Europe have since organised Fridays for Future protests, linking their climate change concerns to transnational networks of climate activists.

Most visibly between 2021 and 2022, the internet and the emerging communication technologies provided youth with new possibilities for continued political mobilisation, despite the restrictions on exercising civic rights in public places. This also coincided with the threat of the co-called “infodemic”: the spread of online disinformation that affected young people’s political behaviours.

A significant proportion of urban young people in Southeast Europe have been politically engaged and have led social movements, but they struggled to be taken seriously by established politicians. They therefore channelled their energy, creativity and aspirations into “digital activism”. A very convincing example of this is the Romanian NGO Funky Citizens, [10] who became well known for their witty and humorous public awareness campaigns. For example, their motto is: “Let’s work our civic muscle!” They were at the forefront of Romanian protests between 2017 and 2018 and are one of the most active NGOs in Romania, using smart technology initiatives, data and communication advocacy for the purposes of civic education. They have conducted numerous online campaigns that have gone viral and are very popular on TikTok, shaping their politically awareness messages towards the characteristics of Generation Z —a social category that comprises people born between 1996 and 2010—, whose identity has been shaped by the digital age, climate anxiety, a shifting financial landscape and COVID-19.

In recent years, “oppositional” forms of youth resistance to authoritarianism have emerged in many countries of South-Eastern Europe

Engaging on social media is not at the same level in all Southeastern European countries (e.g., it is much more significant in Serbia compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina), but remains a significant phenomenon throughout the region. The civic and political engagement of young people through social networks may be insufficient, but online tools are also useful for public information, as young people do not watch TV or other traditional media, and this in itself is crucial for empowering young people for political participation.

## Conclusions

Young people all over the world were dramatically affected, socio-economically and otherwise, by successive global crises, from the economic and financial crisis that started in late 2008 to the COVID-19 pandemic and recent wars. A global decline in the state of democracy, shrinking space for civil society, the polarisation of the political and social space, economic crisis and precarity are all factors that explain low levels of youth engagement with politics. The same trends are visible in Southeast Europe. Even though they are the best equipped in terms of education and technological capabilities, young people remain a partially disadvantaged group from a political point of view and are the main social category at the core of the region's massive brain drain.

More and more experts talk of a crisis in European democracy, with a surge in far-right parties since the European elections in June 2024, voter absenteeism and rising Euroscepticism. These negative trends are evidenced by the serious decline in the political engagement of young people or their radicalisation and support for "anti-system" parties. Their disenfranchisement has important consequences for the state of democracy. As they face poverty, barriers to education, multiple forms of discrimination and limited employment prospects and opportunities, youth in Southeast Europe are one of the most underrepresented groups at the political level.

Young people participate, but their participation is uneven. Some youth participate with fervour in formal politics; others might or might not, depending upon the situation, and as such we should avoid overgeneralisation. In this article I have shown that, in several countries of Southeast Europe, young people have managed to create vibrant "counter-spaces" of democratic learning and resistance to authoritarianism in the 2020s, by containing democratic decline as well as attempting to strengthen democracy from below. Young people have been the backbone of the numerous social movements that emerged across Southeast Europe in the last decade, creating a record of civic and digital activism – from occasional symbolic protests to massive protests on the streets, from ad-hoc initiatives to more structured network initiatives, and from boycotts to demonstrations.

Damaging democratic backsliding in this region has not only contributed to the high numbers of young people fleeing their countries, and to the passivity and ignorance of politics of those that remain; it has also aided in the development of alternative forms of youth engagement in politics. Beyond signing a petition, joining a political party or casting a vote, young people participating in Southeast Europe are now most easily and quickly mobilised through social networks.



Coming back to the question raised in the title: is the youth democratic disconnect a reality? The answer is nuanced. To some extent, in the countries of Southeast Europe we can definitely see the effects of pervasive levels of distrust in democratic institutions combined with a political apathy that threatens democratic legitimisation, while strengthening Eurosceptic narratives and influence young people's electoral behaviour. But we can also find counter-currents of digital activism, climate change strikes and anti-corruption movements that place youth at centre stage in democratic change. Young people in Southeast Europe are neither weak and passive observers, nor determined initiators of change, but somewhere in between. There is still more to be done for their voice to be heard, but we should definitely take seriously this more nuanced picture of their non-conventional involvement in public affairs.

## REFERENCES

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