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INSTITUTIONALISATION OF YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE EU: A NEOLIBERAL ATTEMPT TO CASTRATE THE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE BALLOT BOX**

Abstract. Young people are increasingly withdrawing from institutional and representative forms and turning to alternative political practices. This shift has also been declaratively recognised on the level of political institutions and representatives. This article examines how youth political participation is addressed in the institutional mechanisms for youth political participation in the EU and Slovenia. Using the Foucauldian analytics of government, we show that political participation emerged during the European integration processes with the student protests of 1968 and in the processes of institutionalisation via various governmental operations the critical and alternative voices of young people were shaken off. This is also reflected in contemporary mechanisms such as the EU Youth Dialogue on the level of the European Community and the Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth, where the analysis shows that institutional and representative forms of political action, especially elections, are privileged, whereas alternative youth activities are almost completely disregarded. At the same time, neoliberal rationality is shifting the responsibility for (non-)participation onto young people and attempting to create an identity of active (economic) citizens who will participate in an appropriate manner.

Keywords: youth, participation, institutions, representation, analytics of government.

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INTRODUCTION

Research on youth political participation recognises that while young people are withdrawing from institutionalised and representative forms, this is not synonymous with apathy, disengagement and disinterest in politics. Instead, their growing distrust in traditional politics and institutionalised mechanisms has seen young people turning to a variety of alternative participation practices, also characterised by the wording: political engagement outside the ballot box (Pickard 2019). A number of studies (O'Toole 2016; della Porta 2019; Conner 2024) convincingly document the diverse forms and spaces in which young people have become active. From the *Arab Spring* to the *Indignados* and *Occupy* movements to contemporary youth mobilisations for gender equality, labour rights and environmental protection (Chironi, Porta, and Milan 2024), with the latter in particular also being elevated to the pedestal of youth political participation by movements such as *Fridays for the Future* and *Extinction Rebellion*, which have mobilised large numbers of young people. Sloam, Pickard and Henn (2022, 685) vividly point out that we have “witnessed a ‘youthquake’ in political participation”, notably in relation to environmental issues.

The acknowledgement that young people are attracted to alternative and informal forms and styles of political participation, in which they often engage, can also be identified on the level of political institutions. The Council of the European Union (2015, 10) stated that

[Young people] often find it increasingly hard to identify with traditional channels of political participation such as political parties and trade unions but engage in alternative forms allowing for greater individual choices such as campaigns, petitions, demonstrations and instant events that aim at advocating for a specific cause and a tangible change in their life.

Despite the narrow interpretation suggesting that young people are primarily activated for their individual aspirations and goals, it is important to recognise that awareness of alternative youth engagement, which often goes beyond formalised institutional channels and processes, has already reached political representatives and institutions. Mariya Gabriel (European Commission 2021), the former Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, emphasised the following when announcing that the European Union would dedicate the year 2022 to youth:

The European Year of Youth should bring a paradigm shift in how we include young people in policy and decision-making. /.../ Today's young people are less interested in traditional forms of participation, but they are active in standing up for what they believe in, engaging in new ways. This Year wants to pay tribute and recognise the commitment of young people.

The reaction of political representatives and institutions to the recognised political engagement of young people beyond elections and beyond institutions is thus aimed at the need for recognising and taking account of such activities and demands of young people in policymaking processes.

In this article, we specifically consider how young people's political participation is thematised and addressed in institutionalised mechanisms for youth political participation and how the debates in these mechanisms reflect the direction in which young people's political participation is changing and that this should be addressed and acknowledged. The European Union and most Member States have institutional structures (European Commission, n.d.) in which political representatives collaborate with youth representatives to develop youth policies that respond to young people's demands, needs and aspirations. In the broadest sense, these policy mechanisms aim to involve young people in the formulation of policies that affect them. The paper thus focuses on analysing political participation of young people in two institutionalised mechanisms, the EU Youth Dialogue (hereafter EUYD), which is recognised as the main mechanism for involving young people in policymaking on the EU level, and the Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth (hereafter CGRSY), which is a consultative body to the Slovenian government on youth policy. In both mechanisms, youth representatives together with political representatives discuss the situation of young people and provide opinions and proposals for the formulation of policies affecting young people.

In the following, we first discuss the theoretical-methodological apparatus of analytics of government that we used to analyse the thematisations of political participation in the EUYD and CGRSY. We also present the data corpus and the analytical steps in more detail. In line with the analytics of government, which requires historical contextualisation, we then present the fundamental moments of the institutionalisation of youth political participation in the European Community that led to the establishment of the EUYD mechanism. As we show, the historical contexts have led to the creation of the EUYD mechanism and had a significant impact on the way youth political participation is conceptualised and implemented in the European Community today. Following the historical contextualisation, we analyse how youth political participation is thematised within the EUYD mechanism. In the last part, we analyse the debates on youth political participation between youth representatives and political representatives in the CGRSY.

APPLICATION OF THE ANALYTICS OF GOVERNMENT TO RESEARCH ON THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH

In line with Foucauldian reflections, political participation may be seen as a mode of governing. According to Foucault (2000, 341), in the broadest sense government refers to the exercise of power and different forms of "conduct of conducts" of individuals and collectivities. Political participation is therefore at the

centre of governing because, first, there are institutional forms, rules, norms and prohibitions about how one should (not) participate, or in other words, how the actors, in our case the young people, should (not) act as political subjects (Banjac 2024). There are thus power relations that aim to regulate and shape political subjects for certain normative ends (Anderson 2018). Second, through the act of participation, political subjects attempt to influence the future direction of political communities and the future actions of individuals and social groups, including by resisting or violating the assumed modes of action. Through these actions, political subjects express themselves and influence other political subjects, in turn creating novel power relations.

One of the most comprehensive theoretical-methodological approaches to analysing power relations is the analytics of government (Dean 2010), which is based on four fundamental aspects that guided our analysis. The first aspect focuses on detecting the visibility of government. For our analysis, this involves a detailed insight or illustration of the ways in which political participation is defined, or which aspects of participation are emphasised and which are silenced, and consequently the ways in which such a definition guides young people's actions. The second aspect is the examination of rationalities or forms of knowledge that emerge from and determine the activity of governing. This involves an in-depth exploration and identification of the different expertise, ways of thinking and assumptions that underpin the formulation of youth political participation policies. The third aspect focuses on the practical aspects of government and hence on the analysis of the different mechanisms, procedures and techniques via which specific youth actions are promoted in the context of political participation. The fourth aspect focuses on the formation of identities of individuals and collectivities through which governing operates. For the study of youth political participation, this means illuminating what kinds of agency are assumed, encouraged and expected in policies, programmes and mechanisms of political participation, but also how subjects form their identities through participation (Dean 2010, 41–44). In addition to these four aspects, historical analysis or genealogy is an integral part of the analytics of government (Foucault 1984; Dean 2010, 52), which explains contemporary forms of power in our case, contemporary understandings and enactments of youth political participation by shedding light on historical transformations and processes.

The analysis of the historical contexts that put youth political participation on the agenda of the European Community and the turning points that led to the institutionalisation of the EUYD was based on archival research in the online archives of EU institutions and the Wayback Machine, an online tool that is a digital repository for archived websites. Relevant documents and data were identified using the keywords political participation, dialogues and young people, and by reading studies on young people's participation in European integration processes that reveal more about the processes of institutionalisation of young people's political participation in the European Community. The

analysis included over 150 documents, mainly from the European Community institutions, dealing with the issue of young people's involvement in the political process and especially their political participation, as well as documents with recommendations and position papers from youth organisations. In our analysis of the documents, we focused on the socio-political contexts that led to the specific regulation of young people's political participation and, in line with the analytics of government, on identifying how young people's political participation is defined and understood, or which aspects of it are underscored and made visible and which are silenced. In addition, we identified and interpreted the practical aspect of how political participation is actually implemented.

In the context of the EUYD as a central mechanism for the political participation of youth in the EU, we focused on analysing documents that directly address the issue of youth political participation. Over 20 documents were included, mostly reports from conferences and dialogues between young people and political representatives, as well as conclusions in the form of recommendations and resolutions. Through the prism of analytics of government, we conducted a thematic analysis concentrated on determining how political participation is understood and defined and how young people's representatives and policy-makers address political participation outside the ballot box in their debates. We also focused on the knowledge base or expertise that shapes the specific understanding and representation of young people's political participation. The analysis further addressed the practical aspect of how young people are encouraged to participate in specific actions and which forms of subjectivity are promoted in these actions. On the CGRSY level, we analysed transcripts of meetings from the last two completed mandates. These were eight sessions in the 2014–2017 mandate and seven sessions in the 2017–2021 mandate. Of the 15 sessions, the audio recording of the second session in the 2016–2021 mandate was missing. The data corpus thus comprised transcripts of fourteen sessions, amounting to approximately 390 pages. The analytical prism and research steps were the same as for the study of political participation on the EUYD level.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY: THE CASTRATION OF YOUTH ACTIVISM

The political participation of young people entered the agenda of the European Community after the student protests of 1968.¹ Following those protests, political representatives perceived youth as an angry generation and as a “group that can be mobilized” (Harribey 2011, 115). The protests were defined as a “crisis of the European society”, while at the same time it was pointed out that “promin-

¹ Although the conduct of young people in the European Community began immediately after the Second World War, when the ‘danger’ of mobilising and involving young people in socialist movements was highlighted, youth political participation came to the forefront of European Community policy in the 1970s (Norwig 2014; Banjac 2024).

ent features of the crisis through which our society is at present passing – and this applies particularly to Europe – is the problem posed by the young people of today and the unrest in the universities” (Council of Europe 1968). As a result, the political participation of young people became a central issue in many European countries and was not ignored on the level of the European Community. The Hague Declaration of the Heads of State of the Member States of the then European Community emphasised that “[a]ll the creative activities and the actions conducive to European growth /.../ will be assured of a greater future if the younger generation is closely associated with them” (Council of the European Communities 1969, 16). The European Community is thus committed to ensuring the active participation of young people in the formulation of its policies (Corbett 2011). These processes can be analysed through analytics of government primarily through the lens of visibility. Young people’s political participation only became visible and relevant to politicians through their political struggles, protests and activism. At the same time, young people were defined and portrayed in a certain way – as a problem because of their alternative political engagement. The latter represented an issue for the disruption of the existing political regime, which needed to be addressed. In terms of a Foucauldian understanding, namely through the specific framing of what is visible and what is identified as problematic, policies continuously construct a problem that they then solve through a variety of measures (Foucault 1997, 118; Bacchi 2015, 7).

Based on the 1970 Hague Summit, the European Commission organised the conference *Youth and the European Community* in Brussels. The report on the conference states: “The decision to call such a meeting dates back to the convulsive days of May 1968 in Paris when youth and students proved themselves to be a force to reckon with in modern society” (European Community 1970, 18). The conference was thus a direct response to the student protests, with the aim that the “delegates from political as well as non-political youth organisations in the six Common Market countries and from various international organisations /.../ express their opinions and criticisms directly to Community leaders” (ibid.). Therefore, the conference’s main goal was to discuss how young people could be encouraged to have a more positive view of the future and reflect on the role of young people in shaping policy in the Community. From the perspective of analytics of government, this means that the Commission has regulated the political engagement of young people in order to avoid potential protests and unrest in the future.

The practical level of implementing the conference was also important. The European Commission was faced, as the report states, with the “extraordinary difficulty” of how “to organize a meeting of representatives of 40 million Europeans between the ages of 15 and 30” and due to the “lack of any feasible method” was “forced to invite only the established youth organizations” (ibid.). In the run up to the conference, the Commission organised six national pre-conferences, at which it also met “with the revolutionary student movements of the

far left” which, as the report states, were “more interested in the overthrow of the capitalist system than in the establishment of European unity” (ibid.). In the Commission’s interpretation, these events met with “scant success” (ibid.). The invitation to the conference was therefore limited to representatives of youth organisations, emphasising that the Commission had only selected those organisations that were in favour of “the establishment of the European unity” and not those that were “more interested in the overthrow of the capitalist system” (ibid.). These organisational manoeuvres regarding who is invited to dialogue represent a technical aspect of the functioning of government (Foucault 1991; Dean 1996) where dialogue as “the conversational space is already pre-shaped by regulatory procedures” (Karlsen and Villadsen 2008, 360). By selecting the delegates, the Commission already determined who would represent young people in Europe. With this practical step of selecting only institutionalised and representative youth organisations, it also indirectly framed the debate on political participation. Further, by excluding radically critical youth voices that were opposed to the functioning and direction of the European Community, on one hand it limited undesirable ways of acting and thinking with respect to the political engagement of young people and, on the other hand, promoted desirable ones.

The conference was attended by 250 representatives of youth organisations. Among the four themes proposed by the Commission for the conference, three were retained after opposition from the young delegates. Each theme was dealt with by a special committee. The first looked at the question of the European Community’s policies for society and, according to the conference report, “sharply attacked the bureaucratic, technocratic and capitalistic orientation of the Common Market” (European Community 1970, 18) and proposed a socialist Europe as an alternative to the existing arrangements. The second committee addressed the question of the European Community in international relations, following the line taken by the first committee. The third committee, which addressed the question of the political participation of young people, proposed, among others, the creation of a European Youth Office to which the Member States would appoint their representatives, as well as a representative institution for young people: the Community Youth Council (ibid.). As may be seen from the summaries of the discussions, the conference offered young people the opportunity to take a critical stance on the existing functioning of the European Community. From the analytics of government perspective, it is evident that young delegates were invited to form a specific knowledge about their own actions and future orientations of the Community. The conference thus created an understanding of the European Community as an open space that allows criticism. This in turn legitimised the future actions of the European Community yet at the same time limited the potential for protest since youth were able to express their concerns and criticisms directly to the political representatives of the Community. Moreover, the youth delegates arrived at specific representative and institutionalised solutions to the problem of young people’s political

participation based on their own experiences, their status as delegates, and their socio-political background. Such a mode may be viewed as a “dispersion of government” that “implies the delegating of a wide array of governing tasks to a host of societal actors, although it continues to proffer centrally orchestrated prescription and advice to guide the conduct” (Griggs, Norval, and Wagenaar 2014, 5). By determining the topics and composition of youth delegates, the Commission retains control and defines how the issue of youth political participation in the European Community should be addressed.

The idea or rationality of institutionalising young people’s political participation in the European Community through youth organisations was maintained in the implementation of the policies after the conference. The establishment of the Youth Forum in 1978 was a continuation of this specific institutionalisation. Via negotiations with the Commission, youth organisations not only received funding to carry out the Forum’s activities, but also the opportunity to participate in meetings of European Parliament committees and Commission Directorates-General, giving them direct access to the policymaking process (Jenkins 1979; Council of the European Communities 1988; Corbett 2011). Through the analytics of government and its three aspects – visibility, rationality and practicality – it becomes clear that the protests and political activism of young people identified as problematic, through specific practical manoeuvres of determining which young people are suitable for inclusion in Community policies, have led to the institutionalisation of a representative institution of youth organisations to represent the voice of young people in the Community. Culminating in the creation of the Forum, these processes had a direct impact on the further institutionalisation of youth political participation in the European Community and led, among other things, to the creation of the EUYD.

TOWARDS THE EU YOUTH DIALOGUE: ESTABLISHING A MECHANISM FOR THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

The political participation of young people returned to the agenda of the European Community in the mid-1990s when, inter alia, the difficulties of ratifying the Maastricht Treaty and the steadily declining turnout at European Parliament elections gave the impression that the Community was struggling with a legitimacy deficit. Accordingly, “[m]any EU policy-makers felt that the permissive consensus among the European citizenry about the integration process was faltering” (Friedrich 2008, 140). In Laeken, the heads of state and government of the member states emphasised that the EU had to become “more efficient” and solve the fundamental question of “how to bring citizens, and primarily the young, closer to the European design and the European institutions” (European Council 2001, 21). While through the analytics of government we are able to identify the visibility of forming youth as a problem due to their protest engagement in 1970s, at the turn of the millennium we are confronted

with the formation of a problem of youth due to the lack of their electoral and conventional political engagement. The political response, that is still relevant, was the introduction of governance in the early 2000s, which gave participation and participatory policies a prominent role in the EU (Kohler-Koch and Finke 2007).

In line with the implementation of governance and the trend of involving young people in the Community's policymaking process, the European Commission (2001) launched the White Paper on Youth, which is widely regarded as the formal starting point for youth policy cooperation in the EU (Banjac 2017). To uphold the recognised value of participation and facilitate the drafting of the White Paper, the Commission organised national consultations and EU conferences involving young people, representatives of youth organisations, and policymakers. Lying at the heart of this process was the conference in Paris in 2000, which was attended by 450 young people and political representatives and at which 80 proposals were formulated on topics like employment, vocational training, social inclusion, education, culture and mobility, and political participation. These proposals were to form an important basis for the White Paper. During and after the conference, the French Presidency of the Council of the EU and the European Commission took the position of giving "new impetus to the existing consultation frameworks, youth organisation platforms, particularly the European Youth Forum, Youth councils /.../ and attempting to develop new forms of participation to involve young people more directly and more broadly" (Council of the European Union 2000, 4). The aim was thus to create new mechanisms for consulting young people who are not members of a youth organisation, in addition to the existing dialogue via the Youth Councils and the European Youth Forum. This idea was put into practice at the conference in Paris, where 18 young people were selected to present the results of the conference at a meeting with ministers. The selection process, in which youth organisations were not directly involved, provoked opposition from the Forum and other youth organisations. The Forum (2000, 6) thus "voiced its concern that the invitation of individuals with unclear status might cause systematic and legitimacy problems". In the same vein, the Spanish Youth Council (2001, 4) stressed that the European Youth Forum represents youth on the European level and the idea "to have a group of 18 people having the right and the power to speak on behalf of youth was not positive". With the dispersion of government that includes youth organisations, it is visible through the analytics of government and its practical aspects that there was a political struggle over how youth participation should be enacted and institutionalised.

Youth organisations have fought to institutionalise political participation directly through them: "If the Paris meeting was the culmination point of an important European brainstorming exercise of young people on youth policy, proper reflection and *structured* dialogue on the ideas need to follow now" (European Youth Forum 2000, 4, *emphasis added*). Structured dialogue

represents the idea that dialogue with young people should take place through and with youth organisations, while the European Commission (2001, 16–17) stressed in the White Paper that it was not interested in “ruling out direct consultation mechanisms” with young people and that it would “organise direct dialogue with young people”. However, like in the 1970s, when the Commission organised dialogues solely with representatives of youth organisations, it offered no concrete solution concerning how young people could be involved in the shaping of Community policy in other, more direct ways. Already in the White Paper, the Commission (2001, 28) proposed to reform the national youth councils so as to be “open to young people who do not belong to organisations”, while the same time stating that the European Youth Forum should become “accessible not only to youth organisations and national youth councils /.../ but also for young people who are not represented by these structures”. Through the prism of the analytics of government, these manoeuvres represent a practical way of transferring responsibility (Haahr 2004) for youth participation from political institutions to youth organisations.

In the period following publication of the White Paper, the European Commission worked with youth organisations to coordinate how the political participation of young people should be implemented in the European Union. The idea of structured dialogue with and through youth organisations became established, leading to the official name of the mechanism as the Structured Dialogue (later renamed the EU Youth Dialogue). With the adoption of the Youth Strategy in 2009 (European Commission 2009), the Structured Dialogue became the official mechanism for the development of youth policies in the EU, thus completing the process of institutionalising youth political participation in a specific representative mechanism. The voice of young people, which includes political activism or youth engagement outside the institutions, is to be brought into the youth policymaking process through dialogue with youth organisations and the European Youth Forum. Via the analytics of government, the EUYD is thus an important mechanism for shaping a specific discourse and knowledge about young people’s political participation and framing how young people should engage and act politically.

EU YOUTH DIALOGUE: THE NEOLIBERAL FRAMING OF DEBATES ON THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH

Following the introduction of the Structured Dialogue in 2009, the mechanism evolved to become the EU Youth Dialogue as part of the EU Youth Strategy 2019, although its implementation remains largely unchanged. The EUYD takes place in 18-month cycles focusing on an important topic for the development of youth policy. Each cycle comprises three youth conferences hosted by the countries holding the EU Council Presidency and is usually followed by reports on the outcome of the conferences. These conferences mark milestones and define the implementation of the EUYD in three phases. The stakeholders, including

representatives of the Presidency countries, the European Commission, and the European Youth Forum, first discuss the focus of the cycle. This culminates in the first EU Youth Conference where the questions for the national consultations are defined in discussions between young people and political decision-makers. The second phase involves dialogues between young people and policymakers in the Member States and ends with the second conference where solutions from these dialogues are discussed. The final phase involves the formulation of policy recommendations, culminating in the third conference and leading to an EU Council resolution that contributes to the development of youth policy in the EU (European Youth Forum 2021; European Youth Forum and European Commission 2013). On the level of practical ways of governing, we can recognise the idea “to govern more effectively” (Marinetto 2003, 117), or in other words, how to regulate youth participation in a way that achieves concrete results through well-defined steps. In this process, and through the imperative of effectiveness, youth organisations have a privileged position compared to youth in general as they are equipped with the capacity and information to participate effectively. Alternatively, as Laine and Gretschel (2009, 202) explain in their analysis, youth organisations have “the power of the process” through this systematisation of dialogues.

Since 2009, nine cycles of the EUYD have been completed, dealing with topics relevant to the development of youth policies in the EU. Three cycles have directly addressed the topic of youth political participation. The second cycle, which took place from mid-2011 to the end of 2012 and in which Poland, Denmark and Cyprus held the EU Council Presidency, focused on young people’s participation in democratic life in Europe. The fourth cycle, with Italy, Latvia and Luxembourg holding the EU Council Presidency from mid-2014 to the end of 2015, focused on the empowerment of youth for political participation. The eighth cycle, with Germany, Portugal and Slovenia holding the EU Council Presidency from mid-2020 to the end of 2021, focuses on the topic of space for democracy and participation. In all cycles, it was recognised that young people participate primarily beyond the formal and institutionalised channels of political participation. At the same time, all framed the problem that youth are moving away from the traditional channels of political participation or are not (sufficiently) participating in the institutionalised mechanisms. In the announcement of the fourth cycle, the Italian Presidency of the EU Council (2014, 1) stated that among young people there is a “growing lack of trust and interest in politics, including traditional means of participation, as illustrated by the low turn-out of young people in the electoral process and the lack of young candidates for political office”. Framing the problem in this way does not illuminate the fact that young people are participating beyond institutional channels and outside the ballot box, but explicates that they are inactive within the framework of representative democracy. Another aspect of projecting a problem onto young people can already be found in the title of the fourth cycle “to empower young people to

become active citizens” (Council of the European Union 2014, 5). In this formulation, young people are those who need to be activated, and in order to become active citizens they must participate in formal and institutionalised politics. The discussions at the youth conferences also ran in this direction, like in Denmark where there were discussions about “motivating young people to improve their participation” (Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2012, 2). Through the analytics of government, such attempts were recognised as direct ways of influencing young people’s conduct or attempts to shape and direct their actions and activities. In this sense, the then President of the Youth Forum Silja Markkula (Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2021, 15) emphasised at the conference in Portugal that “young people have to make sure they are not the forgotten generation and participate in co-decision making”. This means that young people and their (in)actions are the ones who are problematic and they are the ones who need to activate themselves properly. Here we can observe what Burchell (1993, 276) described as the neoliberal practice of transferring responsibility that *offers* individuals and social groups new opportunities to actively participate in activities “to resolve the kind of issues hitherto held to be the responsibility of authorized governmental agencies”.

The formulated problem of inactivity among young people thus presupposes a specific activation of young people, which was evident in all three analysed cycles. The focus was almost exclusively on institutionalised forms of political participation within the framework of representative democracy, which in turn marginalised alternative forms of political participation. Although the Council of the EU (2015, 10) acknowledged that young people “often find it increasingly hard to identify with traditional channels of political participation such as political parties and trade unions but engage in alternative forms”, the debates within the EUYD largely focused on representative democracy and specifically on elections. The conclusions of the Council of the EU (2021, 5) following the conference in Portugal stressed that “for an effective approach to /.../ participation of young people/.../ it is important to support the establishment and development of youth representation”. At the same time, in the guidelines for conducting the dialogues with young people in the eighth cycle one of the starting points for the discussion with young people was how to move young people “from informal participation to formal policy making” or how to “bridge the gap between informal engagement and the actual policy participation at all levels of policy/ decision making” (European Steering Group 2020, 3). Such framing establishes and reinforces the belief that the established political institutions and mechanisms are the most effective and legitimate way for young people to participate and influence decision-making processes. Since the conference in Sorø (Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2012, 2) in the first cycle in 2012 to the last conference in Maribor (Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2021) in 2021, where young people’s political participation was discussed, there have been discussions on how to improve youth

participation at elections and initiatives such as lowering the voting age to 16. At some youth conferences, including in Riga (Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2015, 2), alternative forms of young people's political engagement through arts, sports and online debates were also discussed, albeit these forms and modes of participation were not discussed in depth and the debate never reflected the specific activities and demands of young people in these channels. Through the prism of the analytics of government, the EUYD can be identified as a space for building specific knowledge about political participation, including through representatives of youth organisations or delegates at conferences, thereby maintaining the primacy of the conventional participation and marginalising activities outside the institutions and beyond the ballot box as less relevant and less effective.

At the same time, the debates on political participation at the youth conferences also established a knowledge that we recognise as a continuation of economic or neoliberal rationality. This was most clear in the second cycle, where "participation was seen in the broad sense", as the aim was "fostering young people's creativity, innovative capacity and talent as a tool for their active participation in society and increased employability on the labour market" (Council of the European Union 2012, 2). At the conference in Warsaw (Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2011, 9) in the same cycle, participants in the "Youth participation in democratic life" workshop discussed how "non-formal learning process strengthen motivation and therefore empower young people" which contributes to "enhancing decision-making and leadership skills" and also has an "impact on the labour market in terms of fostering the skills and competences of individuals". In the same vein, the report by one of the facilitators of the conference in Denmark reflects the basic idea of the cycle that it is necessary to strengthen "young people's creativity and innovation as a tool to increase youth participation and employability" (Muršec 2012). The fundamental feature of neoliberal rationality is to perceive society as a market and to understand all activities of individuals as entrepreneurial. This rationality is transposed directly to the area of youth political participation. Through the prism of the analytics of government, we can see that young people are perceived to be entrepreneurs who only need to improve their human capital and will do well in both the labour market and the market of participation. The focus on individual human capital and the development of young people's skills has been at the heart of all cycles on youth political participation. The conference reports and the EU Council conclusions focus on developing and strengthening – as the Berlin conference report (German Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2020) directly states – "to gain sufficient skills and motivation (for young people) to participate actively". The neoliberal features of individual growth as well as the responsibility to acquire right skills completely neglect the transformative aspect of young people's political participation to build a different community and to advocate for social change.

THE COUNCIL OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA FOR YOUTH: 'COPY-PASTE' FROM THE EU LEVEL

Given that the development of youth policy and the emphasis on young people's political participation in the EU level has also had a considerable impact on policymaking and the establishment of mechanisms for youth political participation in the Member States (Walther et al. 2021), we were interested in how youth political participation is addressed in institutional mechanisms in Slovenia. We focused on the Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth (CGRSY), established in 2009 "as an advisory body to the government on issues related to the position of young people in society" (Vlada Republike Slovenije 2009). CGRSY meets at least once every 3 months and discusses the agreed agenda, with a decision being adopted for each item discussed. Half of CGRSY is made up of government representatives or representatives of ministries and the other half of representatives of youth organisations (Vlada Republike Slovenije 2023). The council members from the respective ministries are responsible for following up what has been adopted. Among other things, CGRSY monitors and evaluates the situation of young people in society, assesses the consideration of youth proposals for social change and monitors the consideration of youth interests in policies on the national level (Vlada Republike Slovenije 2009). With this orientation, one would expect the diverse initiatives and aspirations of young people, which are established beyond the institutionalised and formalised channels of political participation, to be taken into account by CGRSY and, as a result, attempts would be made to translate them into political decisions and laws. The systematisation of CGRSY can be seen through the analytics of government as a practical mechanism to make the aspirations, problems and actions of young people visible. With this focus, "individual conduct and compartment have become directly implicated in the operations of power" (Curtis 2002, 506). By acquiring knowledge and information about youth, young people can be monitored on one side, and on the other, policies that influence on their conduct of conduct can be implemented.

In the last two mandates analysed, the political participation of young people was frequently mentioned but rarely discussed. Participation was mainly dealt with in technical terms by presenting various initiatives, including the EUYD analysed above, and various representative structures such as the UN Youth Delegate and the UNESCO Youth Platform. Only one of the 14 sessions dealt substantively with youth political participation. At the fourth session of the 2017–2021 mandate, a debate was held on the initiative of representatives of youth organisations under the agenda item *Promoting youth participation*. In the introduction to the debate, a representative of one youth organisation addressed the following question: "Research shows that young people participate less in conventional forms of political participation and more in unconventional forms". He continued: "It should be the goal of all of us /.../ that young people also participate in conventional forms of political participation and democratic

processes as much as possible and in this way can help shape the society we live in” (Representative of a youth organisation, 4th session of CGRSY 2017–2021, July 11, 2019). The aim of the debate was therefore to draw young people’s attention to institutionalised forms of political participation, especially participation in elections. The representative of the State Election Commission (4th session of CGRSY 2017–2021, July 2019), who was invited to the discussion, after presenting the statistics of the last elections, addressed the disinterest or apathy of young people towards politics as follows:

You know that young people who study law and social sciences also vote. My daughter, who studied fine arts, does not vote. Unfortunately, I cannot convince her, she lives in her own world. Those who are in the youth councils and in the youth party wings go to the elections because they are interested, but we have to get the others interested /.../ so that they take part.

In doing so, he not only framed the problem of disinterest and disengagement through the lens of elections, but also attributed responsibility for their political inactivity to the young people themselves. This perspective and the transfer of responsibility to young people, which is a common argument for disinterested and apathetic young people, has been heavily criticised in contemporary studies on young people’s political participation (Hart and Henn 2017).

The problematic nature of this interpretation of the reasons for low voter turnout or youth apathy was highlighted by a representative of a youth organisation in the debate (4th session of CGRSY 2017–2021, July 2019):

[W]e sometimes say exactly what we just heard. Young people are apathetic, young people are not active /.../. When we talk about apathy, we should not only look at participation in elections. We should also look at other forms of political participation, and as I said before, it is true that in conventional forms of political participation, young people are apathetic, but in other forms, they are very, very active.

Recognising that young people’s political participation needs to be seen beyond conventional forms or exclusively through elections, the youth organisation representative perpetrates the belief that young people are apathetic in institutionalised forms. Through the analytics of government, the formation of individual subjectivities and collectivities as problematic because they do not participate in elections becomes clear. Thus, it is not only apathy that is attributed to young people by not participating in elections, but this position is also internalised and perpetuated by the representatives of youth organisations, who in principle are supposed to represent the interests of young people in the CGRSY.

The discussion concluded with a reference to the (un)feasibility of introducing e-voting and lowering the voting age to 16, which was also an official decision

that did not lead to a follow-up. Apart from recognising it is a problem that young people do not vote and that they need to be encouraged to do so, it is also important to recognise that alternative forms of political participation or the existing political activities in which young people are active were not the focus. As Rose (2004, 9) states, the analytics of government “seek an open and critical relation to strategies for governing, attentive to their presuppositions, their assumptions, their exclusions /.../ and their spots of blindness”. Especially the latter, what is excluded and not taken into governing account, requires the attention of the analytics of government, or in Foucault’s (1980, 194) words, “the said as much as the unsaid”. Despite the emergence and political engagement of youth movements and various civil society organisations that were active in the period under study, including Youth for Climate Justice, the 8 March Institute, Where Will We Sleep Tomorrow, MAO – Youth Activist Organisation and the protest Fridays for the Future or Climate strikes and anti-government protests during the time of COVID-19, to name only the most prominent. Besides the above-mentioned recognition that young people are becoming more engaged beyond institutional forms, there was no substantial discussion regarding the initiatives, demands, aspirations and visions of these activities. Moreover, in the discussion that did not directly relate to political participation, a representative of the youth organisation (6th session of CGRSY 2017–2021, 23 October 2020) expressed direct scepticism and resistance to political participation beyond institutional forms:

As we are now in the time of the declaration of a new epidemic, I can say at least from our side /.../ that we would like this good cooperation and communication to continue. Some measures need to be taken so that we students can get through this Covid period well. /.../ We are the ones who are willing to talk, we are eager to cooperate. To put it graphically, /.../ we are not cycling on Fridays, but we want to talk to this government and solve some urgent problems.

Through the prism of the analytics of government, it is obvious that the member of the youth organisation shaped the identity of the representative of the youth and students through generalisations, *from our side* and *we are the ones who are willing to talk*. Moreover, he acted as an expert and established a knowledge that privileges representative forms of participation, thereby legitimising his own position in CGRSY. By denigrating the anti-government protests in which young people had also participated, he was clearly creating a knowledge that privileges conventional and institutional forms of political participation.

CONCLUSION

The paradigm shift towards alternative forms of young people’s political participation, which are recognised and discussed on the level of political institutions, *has not yet taken place* in the political processes and institutionalised

mechanisms for political participation of youth. Based on the analytics of government, we can see that the process is even reversed, and that the institutionalisation of political participation is leading to the castration of young people's political engagement in terms of their influence and recognition on the level of political institutions. A historical analysis of the establishment of political participation on the level of the European Community shows that young people and their political engagement have been put on the agenda through political struggles beyond elections. Nevertheless, the institutionalisation of political participation and the practical manoeuvres included those youth organisations that sympathised with the European Community and excluded critical voices, social movements and protest forms of participation. In terms of neoliberal rationality, the creation of youth structures such as the European Youth Forum and the support of youth organisations has meant a diffusion of government and a transfer of responsibility for political participation to youth organisations and, above all, to young people themselves (Burchell 1993), while it legitimises the European institutions, notably the European Commission, to formulate and adopt policies together with *young people*.

Continuing the institutionalisation that reached its peak at the turn of the millennium, youth organisations in the European Community have fought to preserve and deepen their role by ensuring that young people participate through them. By so doing, they have strengthened their representative role and, in relation to the EU institutions, weakened the voices of young people who have participated beyond formalised and institutionalised mechanisms. However, the economisation of political participation within the framework of governance (Pušnik 2022), similar to the beginnings of institutionalisation in the 1970s, has indirectly led to the exclusion of critical voices. In the economic logic, institutions hold primacy over the content with respect to what they talk about and who they talk to or which youth voices they take into account.

This orientation and the mentioned discourse on political participation are also reflected in the institutionalised mechanisms we analysed, the EUYD on the level of the European Community and CGRSY in Slovenia. Despite the recognition that young people are attracted to informal and alternative forms and styles of participation in political life (O'Toole 2016) and the fact that in recent years/decades we have witnessed the diverse political engagement of young people beyond elections, this alternative political engagement was not addressed in the mechanisms we examined. Through the prism of the analytics of government, among others, we identified that an awareness of the importance of representative forms of political participation and the importance of activating young people, especially in elections, was privileged, while at the same time alternative forms of political engagement by young people were marginalised. This was *inter alia* reflected in the perpetuation of the discourse of youth apathy, with arguments about non-participation at elections and either derogatory representations of protest forms of participation or the silence and non-addressing of the

reasons and proposals that young people express through their alternative and often non-institutionalised actions.

As Walther and Lüküslü (2021, 195) show, only a minority of young people consider institutionalised forms and mechanisms to be a “a ‘real’ opportunity for influence”, while for most of them they “are ineffective and irrelevant”, whereby our analysis shows that this position is only maintained and deepened when dealing with political participation. Through the analytics of government and Foucault’s (1978, 95) insight that “where there is power, there is also resistance” and this “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power”, we can interpret withdrawal from formal and institutional politics as a form of resistance (also Vodovnik 2024). At the same time, as we saw in the student revolts of 1968, ignoring young people can also lead to revolts to which institutional politics *must* respond.

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INSTITUCIONALIZACIJA POLITIČNE UDELEŽBE MLADIH V EU: NEOLIBERALNI POSKUS KASTRACIJE POLITIČNEGA UDEJSTVOVANJA MLADIH ONKRAJ VOLITEV

Povzetek. *Mladi se v svojem političnem delovanju odmikajo od institucionalnih in predstavniških oblik ter se vedno bolj usmerjajo alternativne politične prakse. Takšno usmeritev mladih so na deklarativni ravni prepoznale tudi politične institucije in politični predstavniki. V članku obravnavamo, kako se v institucionaliziranih mehanizmih za politično participacijo mladih v EU in Sloveniji naslavlja politično participacijo mladih. Prek foucaultovskega teoretsko-metodološkega aparata analitike oblasti pokažemo, da se je politična participacija med evropskimi integracijskimi procesi začela s študentskimi protesti leta 1968 in se v procesih institucionalizacije prek različnih praktičnih vidikov delovanja oblasti otrsela kritičnih in alternativnih glasov mladih. To se odraža tudi v sodobnih mehanizmih, mladinskem dialogu na ravni Evropske skupnosti in Sveta vlade za mladino Republike Slovenije, pri čemer je iz analize razprav razvidno, da se privilegira institucionalne in predstavniške oblike političnega delovanja, predvsem volitve, alternativna udejstvovanja mladih pa so skoraj popolnoma spregledana. Hkrati pa se v okvirih neoliberalne racionalnosti odgovor za (ne)participacijo preлага na mlade in poskuša oblikovati identiteto aktivnih (ekonomskih) državljanov, ki bodo participirali na primeren način.*

Ključni pojmi: *mladi, participacija, institucije, predstavništvo, analitika oblasti.*