

## **Policy Paper on democracy**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Democracy is one of the core values of European societies. We have built our political, economic and welfare systems on the idea that all citizens must have a right to influence the direction of their own lives and that of society as a whole. Only through democratic participation and representation of all members of society can we provide freedom, rights and prosperity to all. Only with functioning democracy can we ensure that the oppression, discrimination and violence of the past cannot repeat themselves.

Young European Socialists believes that "democracy is one of the core principles of socialism. Without democracy, we cannot create a society that fulfils the other principles [of social justice, freedom or solidarity]. Therefore the state of democracy in Europe, both nationally and at European level, is a grave concern for us. Europeans must remain vigilant at all times as the power for people to decide for themselves is always dependent on the people demanding their rights, and claiming new rights." (Position Paper, 2013)

But in 2015, we can see that the democracy we believe in is not working in the way we need it to be. Not only do we have a democratic deficit in the structures of local, national, and European decision-making due to multiple reasons, but we also desperately lack the global level of democracy almost entirely. This at a time when more and more issues demand a global approach, have global counter-powers working and global markets structures to tackle.

As well as that, also, a large part of the people have become un- or underrepresented in democratic decision-making even at the lowest levels of our democracies. As democratic powers remain tightly linked to citizenship, large parts of the population of the European countries lack the right to influence decisions on their own life, regardless of the fulfilment of their societal responsibilities, their enthusiasm to participate or their ability to offer the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions.

Large parts of the electorate are alienated from decision-making due to different reasons. Young people, those in vulnerable positions, the excluded and the weak are less likely to vote, when it is their voice we would so desperately need in order to build fairer and stronger, inclusive societies.

In this paper we aim to define democracy as Young European Socialists sees it, fulfilling the needs of the participative and inclusive societies we want to live in. We aim to define the needs, but also a path how to reach a vision of a truly democratic society, where all can and will have a share in decision-making and understand their own role in it. We do not consider it to be an easy task to reach such a vision, and we believe that there are many forces within our societies who do not share our vision, who prefer to keep things as they are, yet we believe that it is the responsibility of our generation to redefine and fight for our democratic rights as the only way to restore trust in the political system and regain the ability to renew our societies.

## **Reality today**

What are the limits of the current form of Western democracy? More and more people feel alienated from decision-making processes and feel like they are not represented, and there is a lot of talk about the need to address the problems with our democracies, yet there are very few wide-ranging suggestions on how to do that, or even thorough analysis of what are the problems.

We see the multiple levels of democracy developed over time, overlapping and competing with each other, as part of the problem. We need a major structural analysis on what should be decided at what level and who should make the decisions. We also see the lack of clear structures at the international level as problematic. How do we address issues related to global markets when there are no global democratic structures to counter them?

We believe in the principle of subsidiarity, and believe that decisions should be taken as close to those affected by them as possible, at the same time ensuring their effectiveness and implementation. Therefore, decisions on local schools or hospitals should be taken at the local or regional level, but climate change or global financial regulation should always be legislated on bindingly at the international level, where decisions can have some effect.

Today, a significant threat to democracy at all levels comes from the hegemonic discourse of the current economic system that attempts to impose only one possible policy by setting the parameters within which the discussion can take place. We should never accept the exclusion of any part of economic policy from democratic control: we should not allow specific economic policies to be enshrined into constitutional law or imposed through undemocratic channels, and will continue to fight for the extension of democracy into all areas of life.

We encounter problems with the implementation of democratic principles on multiple occasions. Whether it is due to unequal representation of alternative views, minorities or civil society in media, of people of different backgrounds on political bodies or lack of access to information or influence by those less affluent, wealthy or simply lacking physical access due to place of residence. Especially money still influences the ability to have one's voice heard in our European democracies, and this is a serious problem. The environmental campaigner has a vastly disadvantaged position to make a reasoned argument to the general public in comparison to an oil company working multinationally.

As the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world increases, the information and knowledge needed to understand and make informed choices as a voter, consumer or in any other function grows. Current education systems do not respond to this need as well as they should. Critical thinking, the ability to search for alternatives and question information given are keys to coping in today's information society, and there is still a lot to do in improving the education in this field.

## **The ideal we want to create**

Today, the world is more interconnected and interdependent than ever. Our economies are dependent on what happens across the world, democratically elected governments rely on decisions made by global market forces or governments elsewhere entirely. All this makes democratic systems both vulnerable and extremely important. We need to fight for working democracies, or we return to the time over a century ago, when the wealth, class and origin of an individual defined one's right to participate in society and to decide for themselves and others.

The democracy we want to see is of an inclusive nature. We want all those who live, work, study and participate in our communities to have a say in what happens in them. This includes minors as well as migrants and those who are less able to contribute to society for one reason or another. Because only through the true inclusion of all members of our societies can we make decisions that benefit all individually, and through that society as a whole. We need to hear the voices of the disadvantaged as well as the successful.

We all need to be able to participate at multiple levels of our democracies. We need to see democracy not only as voting in national elections every few years, but as an ongoing and continuous process of participation. Democratic processes should take place in schools, workplaces and local communities as well as at the regional, national or international level. Wherever decisions that affect our lives are taken.

Democratic decision-making should never be limited in what it can decide on by the will of markets or powerful actors at the national or global level. The economy is only a part of society and must be subject to democratic decision-making, rather than set limits to it.

## **Education**

To be able to participate in any democratic process, a person needs to understand both the system, and the benefit of participating. Democracy demands informed participants to work. Therefore, education has a key role in defining any functional democracy.

We want our education systems to teach participation, active citizenship and democracy from a very early age. We want children to have a right to participate in decision-making in their schools through school councils and other participatory fora from early education onwards. Every school should have a school council to which representatives are elected through elections. These elections should be accompanied with education to the process at the appropriate level to the children receiving it.

Democracy and active citizenship should also be part of the school curriculum throughout the education system. Pupils and students should be introduced to the different democratic models in place, as well as introduced to the political parties and social movements who aim to shape the societies we live in. It should be the aim of education to encourage everyone to participate in decision-making processes in the way they feel suitable for themselves.

Politics, or political parties, should never be banned from educational institutions, yet they should always openly declare the ideological views they hold. Introduction, critical questioning and debate are the best ways to learn and interact with the political and democratic system from an early age and will help bring up generations that are aware, critical and able to demand their own rights.

But education should not end at school. There must be easily accessible and understandable information on the political system and democratic processes available to all who wish to access them at any point. It is the responsibility of public actors to ensure the availability of all relevant information on decision-making structures in libraries, on the internet and from other relevant sources.

Also the decision-making processes need to be transparent and easy to follow. Sessions of parliaments, local councils or other decision-making bodies should always be open to the public, or broadcast on the internet.

## **Inclusion**

Inclusion means everyone of us. We want everyone living, working or participating in our societies to have a say in their direction and future. This means that we want to widen the definition of democratic participation vastly from the current terms. We want to ensure that migrants who live in European countries have the right to vote in the elections. The principle must be that if you are living in a European country, you should have the right to participate in democratic processes. Therefore we demand that all those who hold permanent resident status in a European country, regardless of their legal status, should have the right to vote.

The voting age should also be reduced gradually. We believe that anyone old enough to pay taxes or be criminally responsible for their actions should also have the right to vote and participate in society. A voting age of 18 limits the rights of young people to participate in a

way that cannot be considered justifiable in the 21st century, with education and information available making informed decision-making much easier to younger people than was the case when the current age limits were set a century ago.

Disability should also never limit your right to participate in democracy. In whichever form you see yourself, it's up to us, as society, to empower people with a disability to participate in democracy.

In some European countries, prisoners still lose their right to vote in elections. We believe that everyone in society should have their democratic rights respected, and this must also include those who are serving their sentence in the criminal system.

Finally, we need to open the debate on whether democratic participation can always be strictly voluntary, or whether certain elements of it need to be made compulsory in order to achieve full inclusion: the expansion of mandatory turnout legislation must not be excluded.

### **Freedom of expression and ability to do so**

Freedom of speech, freedom of expression and free media are essential for any democracy to work. Without the ability to express oneself, one cannot be free to participate in democracy. Freedom of the media is as crucial as that of individuals. The information we receive through public, private or social media influences the decisions we make. In the recent years these freedoms have taken serious blows in different parts of Europe. Be it the media laws pushed through in Hungary under the Fidesz governments, or the recent attacks on a satirical magazine in France, we cannot accept the limitation of press freedom without accepting the limits it sets to democracy.

As concerning is self-censorship of the media. When news outlets start censoring their own content due to financial or political consequences, open, democratic society experiences a significant loss in the battle for freedom.

Therefore, we hold freedom of speech, expression and media at a very high value. For us, they are necessary to the creation of a functional democracy. Therefore, we demand that the states and the European Union not only respect these freedoms, but also actively interfere when they are being threatened, be it within the European Union, in the neighbouring areas or further away.

We also believe that freedom of speech is not equally spread between different actors in our societies. Wealth still determines your ability to have your voice heard. This is especially problematic when it comes to election campaigns and the organised lobbying of political decision-makers. The compulsory registration of lobbyists already in place in some institutions is a good first step, but more is needed to ensure that balance is reached. We need stricter campaign funding regulations on both individuals and parties when it comes to receiving contributions from corporate actors, and also more transparency regarding meetings and communication between politicians and lobbyists throughout the political mandate.

### **European democratic model & federalism**

To create real European democracy at the level of the European Union, we need to have a great overhaul of the entire system. We need to build a representative model that takes into account the different levels and still respects the national democratic systems as well. But we also need to incorporate the levels less represented today into this model. We do not oppose the representation of the member states in the European Union's institutions, but no institutions based on a purely intergovernmental process can deliver democratic legitimacy.

Therefore we call for a federal model, in which the people of Europe are represented through the European Parliament, the member states through the Council of the European Union as a second chamber of the legislative, and there will also be a defined role for the regions through the Committee of the Regions.

The European Parliament needs to have the power to codecide on all European Union legislation and the right of initiative, as well as have full budget powers. In order to really represent the people of Europe, some of the members of the European Parliament should be elected on pan-European lists put forward by the European parties.

The Council of the European Union should be transformed into a truly representative upper house of the European Union's bicameral system, representing the member states. The Council of the European Union should have equal powers to the European Parliament, and no upper hand in deciding over the budget, or other legislative issues.

The European Union's executive should be the European Commission, which must be developed into a fully functional government, based on the results of the European election results. It should consist of representatives of the European parties, and it should be formed without interference from member state governments or parliaments. The European Commission should be fully accountable to the European Parliament.

Our vision of a democratic Europe does not end at the European institutions themselves: perhaps most importantly, we must acknowledge that the democratic deficit of the European Union not only arises from the functioning of the institutions and their relationship to the member states, but also from the subordination to market forces from which their current make-up insufficiently protects them. We call for the empowerment of the democratically legitimate institutions in relation to these forces, and for the appropriate legal and treaty instruments to be revised accordingly, particularly the mandate of the European Central Bank, the fiscal compact and various trade agreements and treaties.

### **Labour market**

As ever, a democratically organised society needs a democratic labour market. A liberalised system with individually negotiated work contracts, especially under conditions of high unemployment, implies the employer's near-total control over working conditions and pay, which is irreconcilable with democratic principles: therefore, democracy implies collective bargaining and strong trade unions.

Trade unions cannot be strong or legitimate unless they are democratically representative of workers in the sectors they organise. We therefore call for both an active policy to increase the organisation rate in all sectors and geographic areas through better and more structured information policies, an enforced right to access the workplace and if necessary the incorporation of trade unions into labour-related areas of the social security systems (e.g. unemployment insurance), and for internal reforms to make the structures of the unions themselves more democratic and transparent.

Our ultimate aim is to secure a democratic European labour market through an equal tripartite collective negotiation process at the European level, in which the enshrinement of the European social partners becomes a reality.

### **Economy**

We as socialists and social democrats believe that in order to get trade unions stronger we also need stronger international co-operation and equal tripartite negotiations. Therefore we demand that the work of the International Labour Organisation must be given greater authority and more countries must be persuaded to ratify the International Labour Organisation's conventions. The International Labour Organisation must also be given a greater mandate to open a judicial inquiry when the conventions and standards are violated. In a democratic labour market workers' rights need to be recognized as human rights. Especially we demand that the workers' right to strike is globally acknowledged and the International Labour Organisation's convention 87 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise - is ratified by all member states and thoroughly honored. In the equal tripartite collective negotiation process at the European level the power of trade unions should be more

centralized to the European Trade Union Confederation.

Our vision is not for an economy that functions as a separate realm from society, but for one that is a part of and at the service of society. Therefore, democratic societies cannot live with an undemocratic economy, which the present economic system is by definition since it presumes decisions taken on the basis of property and profit rather than the common good.

For democratic societies to flourish, we need to achieve two steps of democratisation of the economy: first, the right of politicians to take decisions on economic policy independently and democratically must be assured, and second, the economy itself must be restructured democratically.

In the first step, we aim for democratic political structures to be empowered in their relationship to the economy, enabling a democratically legitimate economic and monetary policy. This means the easing of constitutional and legal restrictions on economic decision-making and the uncoupling of democratic structures from an exclusively capitalist economic framework. For this, the role and constitution of central banks as well as the common outlook on issues such as sovereign debt, in-/deflation and state credit-worthiness, which enable business interests to dominate political decisions, must be reviewed in their entirety. Additionally, people must be better educated about the economy, their potential role in it and different options available at the personal and systemic level, in order to make decision-making more transparent.

In the second step, we aim to democratise the economy itself through more democratic involvement into all economic actors, not only in the field traditionally considered political, but also inside economic entities such as corporations. While we believe private property should be respected to the extent that it can be considered properly private, i.e. affecting only the owner(s), as private entities become larger and more powerful in their social context, so must their internal decision-making become more democratic. This implies that we call for the involvement and empowerment of employees and communities into all corporate decision-making that affects them, as well as for a level of public participation in the private sector in those cases where corporations deliver essential services or where their social impact is such that the community cannot survive without them.

### **Active citizenship**

Our democracy is one that works permanently, in which all decisions are continuously subject to democratic scrutiny. This condition cannot be fulfilled by a system in which periodic elections are the only expression of the democratic will, which is even then often disregarded.

Rather, we call for continuous accountability of elected politicians through direct and indirect mechanisms, for continuous consultation of the people, individually or through collective representation via civil society organisations and social movements, and for open and transparent decisions. A more open and more political education system, together with various electronic means of two-way mass communication, can make this a reality.

Meanwhile, it is equally important to ensure that freedom of democratic expression is not limited in any way that is not strictly necessary for the protection of democracy itself: we call for an end to police violence and other forms of state repression against social movements and other democratic protests, as well as for an end to the collusion of police and other branches of the state with right-wing extremist and other anti-democratic forces.

Governments should never use their initial democratic election or their control of a parliamentary majority as a substitute for democratic legitimacy of their decisions themselves: rather, if it is clear that specific decisions are not supported democratically, governments should refrain from taking them even if the structures in place allow them to, and structures should be put in place to prevent them from doing so.

## **Global democracy**

Democracy is not a European, but a global value. We therefore seek to enshrine democracy globally, through its expansion into countries that are not currently under democratic government, its empowerment against globalised market forces and its application to global governance.

Our aim is not to overthrow undemocratic governments through outside interference or military operations, but to assist in the empowerment of the world's people to establish their own democracies, not necessarily on a western model but by creating structures of their own finding. Europe's role in this process is through education and support, financial or otherwise, to civil society and nascent political parties and movements, all the while explicitly excluding the furthering of Europe's or the West's commercial or geopolitical interests through this channel.

As at the European level, we believe that the globalised forces of the market can only be effectively reined in through a democratic global governance that possesses the necessary means to conduct an economic policy. The present, undemocratically constituted and economically biased, Bretton Woods institutions cannot fulfil this role in their current form, and must be radically overhauled.

Ultimately, the United Nations must be transformed into a platform for democratic global governance, with a General Assembly capable of functioning as a democratically elected global parliament, and the associated executive and judiciary structures. The present Security Council with its reflection of a post-Second World War global military and nuclear order does not fit into this framework. The United Nations Security Council needs reform aimed at abolishing the system of permanent members' vetoes. More power should also be given to emerging countries from under-represented regions of the globe such as Africa, the South American continent and the Indian sub-continent.

## **How to get from reality to ideal?**

We are well aware that the achievement of a democratic Europe and a democratic world is a long process, and that reality and our ideal are quite far apart. Nevertheless, we are confident that given the correct prioritisation and by building on already ongoing processes and existing institutions and movements, our vision is not a utopia but a deliverable goal within our lifetimes.

Some of our aims readily translate into policy proposals that can be implemented immediately, and can constitute the first step in the transition to real democracy:

- Introduction of participation, active citizenship and democracy education into school curricula at all levels, involving political parties and social movements
- Introduction of compulsory elected school councils in all European education systems
- Making sessions of all decision-making bodies open to the public
- Stronger policies on freedom of speech and press freedom to be implemented and adhered to across Europe
- Starting a debate on (private) political funding and its effects on democracy
- Abolition or reduction of remaining suffrage restrictions, including the enfranchisement of permanently resident non-citizens, the removal of disqualifications based on disability or imprisonment and also minors from the age of 16 but with a strong reflection for the countries where the vote is mandatory on the whole concept of majority. The possibility to be politically active must be given to all young people including minors.
- Serious investigation of the possibility and effects of extending mandatory turnout to all European countries
- The opening of a debate on the make-up of the European institutions and their democratic character
- Internal democratisation of trade unions and policies to increase the organisation rate
- Cancellation of legal provisions that enshrine specific economic ideologies or policies
- Democratisation of the workplace through elected union representation in corporate

governance

- An end to police violence and state repression of social movements
- Education and support to civil society to further democracy worldwide

These theses alone will not transform European democracies into our utopian state, but they will give a start to a process that can help us shape the democratic systems of this century. We need to ensure that we are the ones pushing for change, rather than to limit it. We need to have visions and see how more of us could have our voices heard in the future, how each and every one of us could trust to have a say in our future. How any one of us could question given, accepted truths and make our case for a better, more just world. Because only if we can believe in our own abilities and those of the societies to guarantee us our voice, only then we can claim that the democracy we live in works.

YES will campaign for these points during its mandate 2015-2017.