LEA

LEADERSHIP | ENGAGEMENT | ADVOCACY

YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN EUROPE

Participation, Power, Skills and Opportunities for a New Generation of European Leaders

RESEARCH FOCUS

Europe does not lack young people with ideas, values or willingness to participate. The central challenge is turning youth voice into skills, access, influence and measurable impact.

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Executive summary

Youth leadership is more than youth participation. Participation gives young people a place in a process; leadership adds the capacity to frame problems, mobilise others, make decisions, create initiatives and influence institutions. Europe has developed a substantial youth-policy ecosystem, yet access to leadership remains uneven and the transition from being consulted to exercising meaningful influence is not automatic.

11.0%	**42%**	**11**
EU NEET rate among 15-29-year-olds in 2025, down from 15.2% in 2015.	16-30-year-olds naming social media as their main source of information on political and social issues in the 2025 EP Youth Survey.	European Youth Goals embedded in the EU Youth Strategy.

LEA's core proposition: Europe should assess youth leadership through five connected dimensions: **Voice, Skills, Access, Influence and Impact.** A young person may be vocal without having access to institutions; trained without receiving responsibility; consulted without influencing decisions; or active without having the resources to sustain impact.

This report is an institutional desk-research synthesis using European Commission, Eurostat, European Parliament, EU Youth Strategy and related official evidence. It is designed for policy development, youth organisations, education providers, municipalities and European programmes.

FROM PARTICIPATION TO INFLUENCE

1. What do we mean by youth leadership?

There is no single EU statistical indicator called 'youth leadership'. It is therefore useful to understand leadership as a composite capacity: the ability of young people to participate, develop competences, access networks and resources, influence decisions and translate participation into sustained social, civic, entrepreneurial or institutional impact.

The LEA five-dimension model

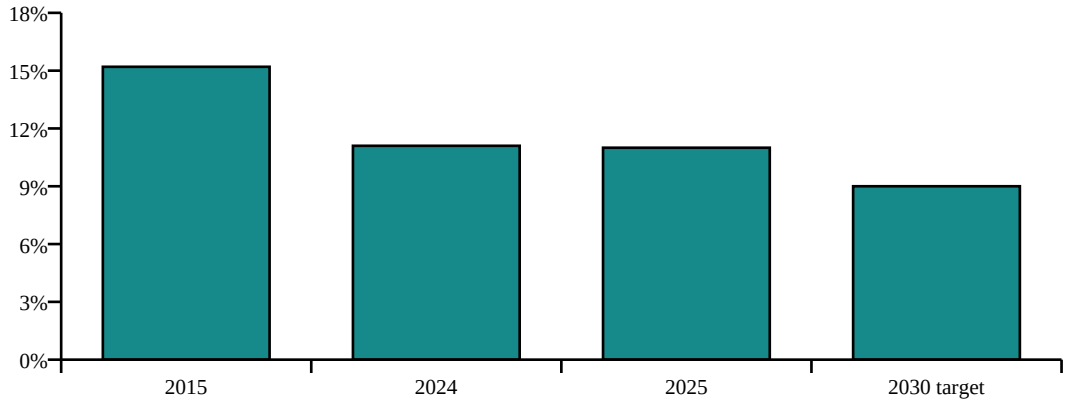
VOICE	The ability and confidence to express needs, ideas, values and solutions.
SKILLS	Communication, collaboration, critical thinking, initiative, digital literacy, project management and democratic competences.
ACCESS	Entry to networks, mobility, funding, mentoring, organisations and decision-making spaces.
INFLUENCE	Evidence that young people shape agendas, choices, policies, organisations or communities rather than merely being present.
IMPACT	The capacity to convert ideas and influence into sustained initiatives, outcomes and follow-up.

2. The European youth context

Young Europeans are developing leadership in a continent undergoing demographic ageing, digital transformation, labour-market change, geopolitical uncertainty and rising pressure on housing and living costs. These conditions shape who has time, resources and confidence to participate.

Eurostat reports that people under 19 represented 20% of the EU population on 1 January 2025, with the share declining across every Member State over the previous two decades. This demographic context makes meaningful youth participation strategically important: younger cohorts are a smaller share of the population while decisions on climate, digitalisation, debt, welfare and democracy will shape their lives for decades.

The inclusion challenge: NEET rates

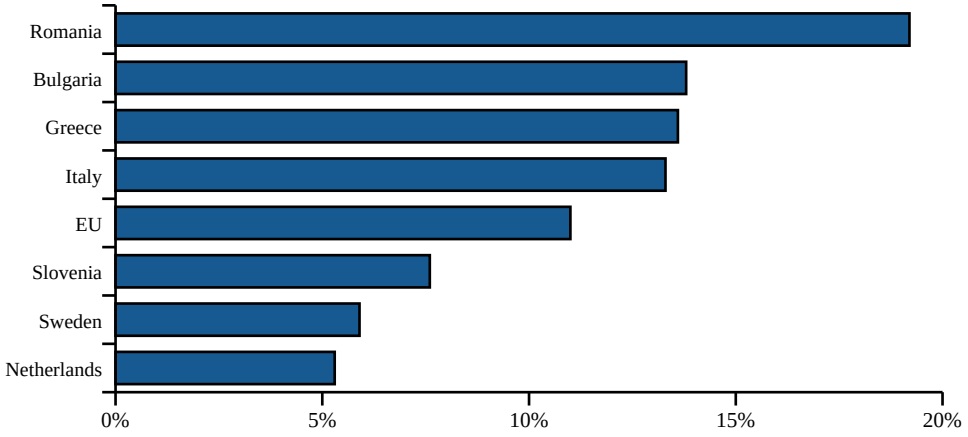


In 2025, 11.0% of 15-29-year-olds in the EU were neither in employment nor in education or training, compared with 15.2% in 2015. The EU's 2030 target is below 9%. Leadership opportunities that depend on unpaid time, travel, social capital or strong institutional networks risk systematically excluding young people already distant from education and employment.

COUNTRY DIFFERENCES MATTER

3. A Europe of unequal starting points

The EU average hides substantial national variation. Eurostat's 2025 NEET data ranged from 5.3% in the Netherlands and 5.9% in Sweden to 19.2% in Romania. Italy stood at 13.3%, after a major decline from 25.7% in 2015.



NEET rate, ages 15-29, selected EU countries, 2025. Source: Eurostat, dataset edat_lfse_20.

NEET status is not a measure of leadership potential. It is used here as an indicator of unequal structural conditions. Youth leadership policy must avoid selecting only those already closest to universities, international mobility, organised civil society and public institutions.

YOUNG EUROPEANS ARE NOT POLITICALLY ABSENT

4. Participation, democracy and the youth voice

European evidence challenges the idea that young people are simply disengaged. The 2024 European Parliament material on youth and democracy reported that 64% of 15-30-year-olds planned to vote in the European elections. At the same time, 19% said they were not interested in politics and 13% were not interested in voting.

Voting was identified as the most effective way to make one's voice heard by decision-makers, while social-media engagement ranked second in the cited 2024 Eurobarometer analysis. This illustrates a hybrid leadership environment in which institutional and networked forms of participation coexist.

64%	**19%**	**32%**
Young people aged 15-30 who planned to vote in the 2024 European elections in the cited Eurobarometer.	Young respondents saying they were not interested in politics.	Young respondents selecting social-media engagement as an effective way to make their voice heard.

Leadership implication: the policy question is not simply how to make young people participate. It is how to create credible routes from expression and mobilisation to deliberation, responsibility and influence.

5. Digital leadership: opportunity and vulnerability

Digital spaces lower barriers to publishing, organising, networking and cross-border mobilisation. They can allow a young leader to build a community without first entering a traditional organisation. At the same time, visibility is not the same as influence, and attention is not the same as leadership.

The European Parliament's 2025 Youth Survey found that social media was the leading source of information on political and social issues for 42% of respondents aged 16-30, ahead of television at 39%. Among 16-18-year-olds, social-media reliance was even higher.

Four tensions of digital youth leadership

- **Reach vs depth:** large audiences can coexist with shallow engagement.
- **Speed vs deliberation:** rapid mobilisation may leave little space for evidence, reflection and compromise.
- **Visibility vs representation:** highly visible creators do not necessarily represent diverse youth populations.
- **Access vs manipulation:** digital platforms expand participation while exposing young people to disinformation, polarisation and algorithmic incentives.

LEADERSHIP MUST BE LEARNED AND PRACTISED

6. The skills gap

Leadership is often treated as an individual personality trait. For public policy, a more useful approach is to view it as a learnable set of competences developed through practice, feedback and responsibility.

Competence	Why it matters for youth leadership
Communication	Explaining ideas, listening, negotiating and speaking across different audiences.
Critical thinking	Testing information, identifying assumptions and making evidence-informed choices.
Collaboration	Working across differences, sharing responsibility and resolving conflict.
Initiative	Moving from diagnosis to action without waiting for institutional permission.
Project literacy	Planning activities, budgets, timelines, risks, partnerships and evaluation.
Digital literacy	Using digital tools while understanding information quality, privacy and platform dynamics.
Democratic competence	Understanding institutions, rights, pluralism, participation and accountability.
Intercultural competence	Leading across languages, identities, countries and social backgrounds.

Non-formal education, youth work, volunteering, associations, student organisations, civic initiatives and mobility programmes are therefore not peripheral experiences: they can function as leadership laboratories when young people receive genuine responsibility and reflection opportunities.

7. The access gap

- **Economic barriers:** unpaid participation, travel, accommodation and opportunity costs can favour young people with stronger family resources.
- **Geographic barriers:** opportunities cluster around capitals, universities, major NGOs and international networks.
- **Information barriers:** European opportunities can be difficult to discover or navigate without an organisation already connected to EU programmes.
- **Language and confidence:** international leadership spaces often reward strong communication skills before participants have had a chance to develop them.
- **Network effects:** previous participation generates references, contacts and knowledge that make subsequent opportunities easier to access.
- **Representation gaps:** young people with fewer opportunities may be invited as beneficiaries while remaining underrepresented in governance and decision-making roles.

LEA principle: inclusion should be measured not only by who attends, but by who speaks, who decides, who controls resources, who represents the organisation externally and who remains involved after the funded activity ends.

8. Europe's opportunity architecture

The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 provides a strong policy architecture for youth leadership. Its three core areas are **Engage, Connect and Empower**. It promotes democratic participation, youth representation, cross-border mobility, youth work, non-formal learning and the recognition of competences.

The Strategy is also linked to 11 European Youth Goals developed through a dialogue process involving young people across Europe. The interim evaluation support study concluded that the Strategy remains relevant and highlighted the EU Youth Dialogue and integration of youth perspectives into EU programmes as important channels of impact.

Key European routes to leadership development

- **Erasmus+ Youth:** exchanges, youth participation activities, mobility of youth workers and cooperation projects.
- **European Solidarity Corps:** volunteering and solidarity activities that can develop responsibility, initiative and community leadership.
- **EU Youth Dialogue:** structured interaction between young people and decision-makers within the EU Youth Strategy.
- **European Youth Goals:** a shared framework connecting youth priorities to European policy cooperation.
- **Youth organisations and youth work:** spaces where leadership can be practised through real roles rather than simulated exercises.

BEING HEARD IS NOT ENOUGH

9. The consultation-to-influence gap

A central weakness in youth participation systems is the potential gap between consultation and influence. Institutions may organise surveys, dialogues, events and panels without making clear which decisions young people can actually affect.

Level	What it looks like	Leadership value
Information	Young people receive information.	Low unless it enables later action.
Consultation	Young people are asked for views.	Useful, but influence may remain unclear.
Co-design	Young people help shape activities or policy options.	Develops ownership and negotiation.
Shared decision	Young people hold defined decision rights.	High leadership-learning value.
Youth-led	Young people control agenda, resources or implementation within agreed boundaries.	Strongest direct leadership practice.

Meaningful youth leadership does not require institutions to transfer every decision to young people. It requires transparency about the level of influence offered, appropriate responsibility, feedback on what changed, and accountability for both adults and young participants.

VOICE - SKILLS - ACCESS - INFLUENCE - IMPACT

10. The LEA European Youth Leadership Framework

01 VOICE	Create safe and credible spaces for young people to define problems, not only react to agendas designed by adults.
02 SKILLS	Combine non-formal learning with real tasks, mentoring, feedback and reflection.
03 ACCESS	Remove financial, geographic, informational, linguistic and network barriers to leadership opportunities.
04 INFLUENCE	Specify which decisions young people can shape and provide feedback showing how their input was used.
05 IMPACT	Give young people pathways to resources, partnerships and follow-up so that participation can produce sustained outcomes.

11. Ten recommendations for Europe

01 Move from counting participants to measuring **decision-making responsibility and influence**.

02 Create funded leadership pathways specifically for young people with fewer opportunities, including participation costs and mentoring.

03 Make youth boards and advisory structures transparent about their mandate, decision rights and institutional response.

04 Recognise non-formal leadership competences through credible portfolios, Youthpass-style reflection and links to education and employment.

05 Expand youth-led microgrants so young people can control small budgets and learn through implementation.

06 Invest in digital civic literacy: leadership online requires critical information skills as well as communication reach.

07 Build local-to-European pathways so leadership does not depend on living near capitals or already belonging to international networks.

08 Require meaningful youth co-design in programmes substantially affecting younger generations.

09 Support intergenerational leadership models in which adults provide access and accountability without dominating agendas.

10 Track long-term outcomes: networks created, initiatives sustained, positions of responsibility reached and policy changes influenced.

SUGGESTED LEA INDICATORS

12. Measuring youth leadership

Dimension	Illustrative indicators
Voice	Diversity of young people contributing; confidence to speak; ability to propose agenda items.
Skills	Self/peer/mentor evidence of competence development; tasks completed with real responsibility.
Access	Participation by fewer-opportunity groups; geographic spread; costs removed; first-time participants.
Influence	Recommendations accepted or acted upon; decisions co-made; youth voting or governance rights.
Impact	Youth-led initiatives launched; resources mobilised; beneficiaries reached; follow-up after 6-12 months.
Institutional change	New youth roles, procedures, budget lines or governance mechanisms retained after the project.
Network capital	New cross-sector or cross-border relationships maintained and used by young participants.

A high-quality leadership programme should therefore measure more than attendance and satisfaction. The critical question is whether participants gained **agency, responsibility, access and durable capacity to act**.

LEA INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

13. Conclusion

Europe has a substantial youth-policy infrastructure and many young people are already active in democratic, social and digital spaces. The challenge is not a simple absence of engagement. It is the uneven conversion of engagement into leadership.

Socioeconomic inequality, geography, network access, information asymmetries and the design of participation mechanisms can determine who moves from participant to decision-maker. At the same time, digital spaces are creating new routes to visibility and mobilisation while increasing the need for critical literacy and responsible leadership.

For LEA, the strategic objective should be to build a European leadership pipeline in which young people can move from **Voice to Skills, from Skills to Access, from Access to Influence, and from Influence to Impact.**

LEA POLICY MESSAGE

Europe should not only invite young people into the room.

It should equip them to understand the room, diversify who gets into it, give them meaningful responsibility inside it - and create pathways for young people to build new rooms of their own.

Prepared by **LEA - Leadership Engagement Advocacy**
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SELECTED EUROPEAN SOURCES

References and methodological note

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Methodological note. 'Youth leadership' is not a single harmonised Eurostat indicator. This report therefore combines official evidence on youth participation, democratic engagement, digital information, demographic context, inclusion and EU youth-policy instruments. Socioeconomic indicators such as NEET rates are used to describe structural context and should not be interpreted as measures of individual leadership capacity.

Scope. Age bands differ across European datasets (for example 15-29, 15-30 and 16-30). Each statistic should be interpreted using the age group defined by its original source.

Use: policy development, programme design, youth work, advocacy and institutional reflection. The LEA Voice-Skills-Access-Influence-Impact model is an analytical framework proposed in this publication.