

Sow Democracy Through Youth Work

Democracy in Action: Youth Work Matters!
Conference 3 – 5 December 2025, Strasbourg

REPORT



Documentation

ijAB

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The Conference: Youth Work and Democracy



The conference ***Democracy in Action: Youth Work Matters!*** came timely. In the last twenty years, the [number of democracies in the world has been decreasing](#). For the first time in over a century, we must confront the possibility that today's young people may not experience a future that is more democratic or freer than the one their parents knew. This development negatively

affects civil society, which is where most youth work takes place and where young people are expected to begin engaging in social and political life. This gloomy perspective was taken as a call to action by IJAB – International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany. In cooperation with the Council of Europe, IJAB hosted a conference for representatives of youth work from Europe and beyond in December 2025 and put youth work and democracy centre stage.

Youth work has different traditions in different countries and is related in various ways to democracy. Some youth organisations directly aim to foster the participation of youth in democracy and politics; others advocate for youth participation and inclusive policy making. Some youth workers offer citizenship education or promote children and human rights, while others link cultural activities or sports to participation, fairness or human rights education. These diverse forms of youth work were represented at the conference.

The conference aimed to empower youth work representatives by exploring current developments, fostering solidarity among participants, and equipping young people and youth workers to defend democratic values, practices, and institutions against erosion. To reach these objectives, the conference offered a [rich program](#): keynotes by experts and policy makers alternated with interactive sessions, where participants shared experiences, best practices, and actively shaped the program with their plans for future action. The venue, the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, facilitated networking and intercultural exchange.

The conference successfully reached its target group: Roughly 80 participants from 20 countries and three continents travelled to Strasbourg. Most participants represented civil society organizations (CSO). Some came from small local organizations, others from national umbrella organisations or from universities. The introductory exercises showed that one part of the antidote to democratic erosion was in the room. People in countries as different as Georgia and Germany, Türkiye and Tunisia, the USA and Italy used similar words to describe what youth work means for democracy: solidarity, active listening,

participation, dialogue, consistency, actions, resilience, social glue. They share with the organisers a belief in the power of youth work to strengthen democracy.

This report describes the main insights of the conference structured around its key topics. It follows the overall logic of the programme. The first section describes the current state of democracy, focusing on the challenges for civil society and youth work. The second section summarizes shared practices and ideas for action. The report deliberately avoids listing every program point individually. Instead, it focuses on identifying key topics and perspectives to make the results accessible and valuable for those who did not attend the conference. The report concludes with overarching reflections to strengthen youth work and democracy.

Taking stock: Democracy Under Attack

The conference started by taking stock of current developments. In his welcoming words, **Uwe Finke-Timpe**, Head of Division in the German Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, stressed his government's willingness to support democracy promotion, just to add that democracy cannot be sustained by governments alone:

"Democracy needs engaged citizens and civil societies."



Daniel Poli

These words aligned well with the conference's objectives: by empowering youth work and strengthening youth participation, **we can address some of today's most pressing challenges.**

In his keynote, **Staffan I. Lindberg**, director of the V-Dem institute, offered words and numbers describing current developments. Empirical data on shrinking civic space and declining civic engagement showed that the experiences shared by participants in the working groups are part of a broader trend. The same applies to challenges related to funding and the rise of undemocratic narratives.

The Power of Civil Society

Not only the participants, but also anti-democratic actors are aware of the significance of social engagement and civil society. Participants from countries such as Belarus and Serbia shared experience of extreme repression of youth CSOs. The stories shared at the conference are not isolated incidents. According to V-Dem, the repression of civil society ranks among the three most significant [democracy indicators](#) in the period 2014-2024, while declining civic engagement is among the top five.

For the youth sector, recognizing this development for what it is can be challenging, as attacks on democracy are rarely as blatant as they were in the United States in 2025. Typically, democratic decline occurs incrementally. Youth organisations are often used to work with unsecure funding and the need of constant justification of their work. The exchange with other participants and the keynote by Lindberg helped to recognize how this experience is related to shrinking democratic spaces.

Strikingly, participants from countries that can be classified as autocracies told stories that participants from countries considered democratic and free could relate to. Significant differences remain. In some countries, 'foreign-agent-laws' make CSO work nearly impossible, while in others youth workers are employed in publicly funded NGOs. But the approach to question the trustworthiness of CSOs, scrutinize the 'efficacy' of public funding or question the legitimacy of foreign funding is strikingly similar. Democracy needs engaged citizens and organized civil society; therefore, anti-democratic forces seek to weaken it.

The Power of Money

Money is power, is a German saying. If this is true, the global decline of democracies is even more worrying. Lindberg underlined that not only the number of countries classified as democracies has been declining since over a decade. The decline becomes even more pronounced when measured per person (population-weighted) or by economic influence (GDP weighted). Today, not only less countries are democratic than ten years ago, but also less people live in a democracy and these people command over much less financial means. This is exacerbated by the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Lindberg estimated that through these developments more than half of the financial resources invested in democracy promotion on a global scale have been cut.

Experiences in the youth sector reflect these global developments. Several participants reported the reduction of international funding. They shared that some international donors expect that projects are implemented as planned despite severe cuts in funding. In non-democratic contexts, public money



officially destined to youth work can be deviated by corrupt politicians, as Serbian participants shared. Participants from Germany reported how parliamentarians use their instruments as overseers to question the legitimacy of public funding of CSOs including youth work, enhancing the workload for reporting and justification. The ever-challenging financial situation of youth work is therefore worsening because of these developments.

The Power of Words

The incremental development of the global attack on democracy is also pursued with the deliberate misuse and reinterpretation of the term democracy as well as important principles like the freedom of expression, human rights and children's rights. The latter are core topics of youth work. The challenge is that some anti-democratic forces claim these terms for their own activities and policies, including in their engagement with young people.

A similar mechanism also applies to negative terms. In cases like Türkiye, CSOs and activists can be accused of terrorism for the organization of a demonstration. This is a dangerous and deliberate misuse of language – exploiting fear as a weapon to undermine an activity that should be protected by fundamental democratic rights. Again, Lindberg's keynote showed how well-funded the impression was that the information cacophony fuels the dismantling of democracy. Disinformation and polarization are significantly more prevalent in countries that are trending toward autocracy than in those moving toward stronger democracy.



The manipulation of language affects youth work at least on two levels. The first concerns direct exchange with young people. Youth workers need to counter false understandings conveyed by (social) media or anti-democratic actors. The second is the communication about their work, be it public communication or reporting. Misleading narratives in society create pressure to explain and justify youth work. To meet these challenges, the youth sector is compelled to sharpen its own understanding of democracy, an ongoing task that concerns all those involved. Through the combination of academic input and exchange between practitioners, the conference in Strasbourg showed how such a process can be approached.

However, a clearer understanding is not enough. Youth work also requires strategies for action. In one discussion round, participants thoughtfully concluded that it lies in the very nature of democracy to allow for all kinds of voices to be heard. Undemocratic and potentially harmful voices are probably louder and more influential in our times, but they have always existed. Democracy inherently requires that such voices are not suppressed before they are heard. Youth work must find strategies to counter them, both in the direct work with youth and in communication with the public, authorities or partner organisations. Communication strategies must address both the need to counter false narratives and the importance of engaging with critical voices.

Taking action: Sow Democracy through Youth Work

After the work on a common understanding, the conference moved on to exchange best practices and develop ideas for action. This section clusters strategies, ideas and approaches shared by participants

and speakers, focusing on topics that represent promising avenues for further strengthening youth work for democracy.

Miriam Teuma, Chair of the European Council's Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) reminded the participants of what should be at the centre of youth work: the young people. Similarly, the participants themselves, approximately half of them under thirty years old, highlighted that youth must be in the focus. On several occasions, the importance to create physical spaces and encounters was underlined. The observation emerged that younger individuals from very challenging contexts tended to have ambitious plans, regardless of their circumstances. We humans are always shaped by the time we grow up. While older generations may respond to regression with resignation, younger generations meet the same challenges with energy and optimism. This is one way how the following statement on a flipchart can be interpreted:

"We the youth are not only the future. We are the present."

This resonates with the keynote by **Matjaž Gruden**, Council of Europe's Director for Democracy. Gruden underlined that youth work and youth participation lie at the heart of current political projects at the Council of Europe. At the Conference of Ministers held in Malta in October 2025, the [**Reference Framework on the Integration of a Youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe**](#) was adopted. Gruden raised the expectation that this framework has the potential to transform policies, provided it is taken seriously.

Youth also feature prominently in the [**New Democratic Pact for Europe**](#), an endeavour launched by the Council of Europe's Secretary General in 2025. This pact is being co-created with different actors including youth and civil society. Gruden sent the message to the participants that democracy cannot be protected and saved in European capitals like Strasbourg or Brussels, and not by policy makers alone. This statement underlined the words by the representative of the German government at the opening of the conference.

The Changing Places of Youth Work

While politics makes headlines at national level, the local level was put into the spotlight in several projects, illustrating what Miriam Teuma had said in her keynote: "Youth work stands where democracy begins: at the local, relational level, where young people meet face to face." The focus on the local level was illustrated in different ways. [**GoFor**](#) from Türkiye shared that against the background of repression at the national level, they started their local youth policy program which focuses on municipalities. The core idea is to collect information about local youth policies and eventually develop an agreement with the local administration about the improvement of these policies based on youth rights and human rights. A focus on the local level can include an international dimension, as the presentation of the project [**Generation Europe – The Academy**](#) shows. This project lasts three years, positively described as 'long-term' in the conference. During this period, monthly local meetings are combined with tri-national meetings with project partners. Young people take responsibility at the local level and are strengthened through international exchange.



Unfortunately, some countries suppress democratic youth work entirely. [Rada, the union of Belarusian youth associations](#) is a case in point. It continues to operate even though it was forced into exile in 2022. Rada has been registered as an NGO in Lithuania; its members live in various countries of the region. The organisation has turned the consequences of autocracy into the focus of its work by developing a project based on the passport as an identity document. It produced a facsimile of the Belarusian passport, replacing the usual blank pages for stamps and visas with information about the limited rights such a document confers in an autocratic state – and how it can even become an instrument of repression. These examples show that youth work must have a direct connection to the local community. At the same time, it must embrace creativity and innovation, especially in times of political adversity. In such cases, an international network can be particularly helpful.

The Diverse Approaches of Youth Work

Not only the physical places but also approaches through which youth work engages with democracy varied significantly across the presented projects.

Youth work can take many forms and can adapt to diverse contexts:

- **Advocacy and collaboration:** It can focus on advocacy, monitor public authorities' activities in the youth sector, and offer partnerships to drive improvement (e.g., [GoFor Türkiye](#)).
- **Cultural engagement:** It can manifest as festivals that connect young people with arts and culture, creating public spaces for democratic expression (e.g., [Festival Política, Portugal](#)).

- **Digital engagement:** It must extend into the digital world, where fostering connections to democracy is essential (e.g., *DigitAL and DIYW ROAD, DARE network*).
- **Resilience in crisis:** It must also adapt to extreme circumstances, such as war, by providing trauma-sensitive support (e.g., *3ipku. Stars. Les Étoiles., Ukraine/Council of Europe*).

These examples demonstrate that youth work is steadily evolving to keep pace with the diverse needs of young people and a changing world. Matjaž Gruden encouraged the participants to continue this work and focus on the needs and problems of young people. In Grudens words, not trusting democracy has often emotional rather than rational reasons. It is the consequence of real problems, which politics fail to address. Youth work must take this seriously in helping youth to identify their problems, express their fears and find solutions. This resonated with the participants, several of whom expressed the wish to “let every young person participate”, “show instruments to bring ideas and needs on the political agenda”, or address “hurdles for young people to participate in meetings and events”.

The need for strategies to deal with anti-democratic narratives described above must consider the ambition of youth workers to be as inclusive as possible. Also, different strategic focuses are needed for diverse youth work approaches. Advocacy work may require a different communication strategy than trauma-sensitive work with individuals, a citizenship education course may require more detailed discussions of the concept of democracy than a festival. The conference showed that a wide variety of strategies already exist and enabled participants to learn from each other.

The Politicisation of Youth Work

Throughout these discussions, one question loomed large—and it will continue to occupy youth work far beyond the conference: how political can and should youth work be? One aspect of the topic is the perceived lack of political thinking among youth. Participants from different countries shared similar paradoxical experiences with solidarity: young people were often ready to help and volunteer in reaction to extraordinary circumstances. Apparently, such solidarity only occasionally translated into political consciousness and action. While participants expressed a desire for a more politically engaged youth, their vision for the role of youth work was still taking shape.

Probably, this is related to another aspect of the topic, which concerns youth work at the organisational level. Several participants shared that the CSOs they represent understand themselves traditionally as non-partisan and non-political organisations. This view is challenged when social engagement and advocacy for topics like human rights and youth participation becomes politicised. Participants discussed the importance of taking a political stance but also acknowledged the challenges in determining a suitable approach.

A promising way of dealing with this challenge was shared by the German Sports Youth presenting their project “[Sport with Courage](#)”: as a federal umbrella organization, they developed guidelines for their local member organisations, providing a variety of instruments to react to the challenging circumstances



related to racism, inhumane and anti-democratic attacks. Such instruments range from information services about obligations and rights of sports clubs and volunteers to legal advice.

This distribution of tasks between a national umbrella organisation on the one hand and local, often volunteer organisations on the other could be a promising strategy and a useful division of labour also in other contexts. Local organisations may concentrate on their main goal to keep their door open for all youth and their educational work. National organizations may be better equipped to develop guidelines and inform about best practices on how to deal with challenges. This could be one way of implementing what Director for Democracy Gruden reminded the participants to do:

“If we want to defend democracy, we have to agree on what we are defending.”

As confident as the participants were about the relevance of youth work for democracy, as thoughtful and careful they were regarding the political claims youth work should make. In various formats, participants were given a ‘carte blanche’ to brainstorm the future of youth work, summarise their wishes as campaign slogans, and similar. Many statements and visions centred on affirming the inherent value of youth work. A few written statements addressed structural issues like the need for funding or cooperation at the European level - a contrast to working groups and informal discussions, where structural challenges were vividly discussed. This may indicate that youth work, much like civil society, often finds itself in a defensive position in today’s context. In this climate, youth work needs advocates and allies willing to step forward.

The Seeds Need Water!

Democracy is under threat worldwide, and youth work is at the heart of the response. The **Democracy in Action: Youth Work Matters!** conference, held in Strasbourg in December 2025 highlighted the urgent threats to youth work and its critical role in upholding democratic values.

Key challenges that directly affect youth work include:

- **Repression of Civil Society:** Youth work, as part of civil society, is directly impacted by the global decline in democratic freedoms. Anti-democratic forces are increasingly targeting civil society, making it harder for youth work to operate.
- **Economic Shifts:** Democracies now hold less economic power than a decade ago, a trend accelerated by geopolitical changes, such as the second Trump administration in 2025. This has worsened funding shortages, especially in countries reliant on international donors.
- **The Deliberate Distortion of Meaning:** Anti-democratic groups are co-opting terms like "democracy" and "human rights," forcing youth work—traditionally non-partisan—to take a clearer stance on these politicized issues.

The participants shared best practices that showed the importance of strengthening local youth work, including through international collaboration, addressing diverse and relevant topics such as trauma-sensitivity and political aspects of the digital world, and ensuring the sustainability of long-term projects for greater impact.

In the concluding session, participants offered their ideas on how to react to current challenges and chaired a wide variety of sessions: from the presentation of concrete facilitation methods to co-creative project planning, and the transfer of knowledge from the youth council in one autocratic country to the youth council of another country.

These seeds must be watered. Different speakers at the conference underscored the urgent need for civil society, including youth work, to actively defend democracy and preserve democratic spaces for young people. While the importance of civil society in fostering democratic resilience is widely recognized, it is also increasingly targeted and suppressed by anti-democratic forces. Organizations and actors responsible for resource allocation must recognize this challenge and establish support systems for youth work that promotes democracy. Evidence from recent years shows that international efforts to strengthen civil society have been pivotal in reversing democratic decline in many countries.

At the conference, an inspiring example with a long history was shared: The [Danish Youth Council](#), which was founded in occupied Denmark in the 1940s, has a government mandate and provides structural and project funding to its member organisations as well as to international partners.

This historical example with its enduring positive impact offers two lessons. The first lesson offers hope: youth work today draws on a long and rich tradition of experiences and enjoys the support of allies in democratic countries. The second lesson reminds us of an important task, as captured eloquently by John Dewey in *Democracy and Education*: "*Democracy must be born anew every generation. Education is its midwife.*" Youth work, as a form of education, plays a vital role in nurturing democracy, much like a

midwife supports a birth—each with its unique challenges and risks. To fulfil this role effectively, youth work requires supportive and enabling conditions.

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