



Cross-National Synthesis Report

Youth Perceptions of Democracy Across Four European Countries

Cyprus · Italy · Lithuania · Spain

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Executive Summary

This report presents the consolidated findings of the UNMUTE project's first qualitative research phase, drawing on **national desk research** and **focus group discussions** conducted in four partner countries: Cyprus, Italy, Lithuania and Spain. Each country implemented desk research and two focus groups - one with participants aged 14–18 and one with participants aged 18–30).

Across these four national contexts, young people aged 14–30 were invited to share their perceptions of democracy, their trust in institutions, their experiences of civic participation, and their connection to the European Union. The picture that emerges is one of young people who are thoughtful, aware, and in many cases already active - but who feel systematically excluded from meaningful democratic participation. Democracy is widely valued as a principle, yet experienced as exclusionary, especially for those under 18.

Four cross-cutting themes recur across all national contexts:

- Low institutional trust, shaped by specific experiences of being ignored, misled, or formally consulted but substantively sidelined;
- The gap between being heard and being listened to - young people are invited into formal spaces but rarely feel their voices influence actual decisions;
- Structural barriers that compound the disadvantages faced by migrants, young women, LGBTQI+ individuals, people from low-income backgrounds, and those from rural areas;
- Insufficient civic education - not just lack of knowledge, but absence of practical pathways for meaningful democratic engagement.

Despite these challenges, the research also documents resilience, civic motivation, and genuine desire for change. Participants across all four countries expressed a clear wish to contribute to democratic life - not symbolically, but substantively. The EU emerges as a more positive and accessible reference point for many young people than their own national political institutions.

This report is structured to present the cross-national picture in three complementary ways: first, a country-by-country account of findings from both desk research and focus groups; second, a thematic synthesis identifying convergences, divergences, and patterns across all four countries; and third, conclusions and recommendations for UNMUTE project activities.

1. Introduction

1.1 About the UNMUTE Project

“UNMUTE - Because Democracy Does Not Work in Silence” — is a European project funded under the CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme. The project brings together civil society organisations and youth-focused NGOs from Cyprus, Italy, Lithuania, and Spain to deepen understanding of how young people relate to democracy, and to create meaningful spaces for youth voices to be heard across Europe.

The project's title captures its central premise: democracy is weakened when voices are silenced, marginalised, or never invited into the conversation. Young people — formally

recognised as citizens and future voters, yet frequently absent from decision-making spaces — represent one such group.

1.2 Purpose and Structure of This Report

This synthesis report consolidates findings from two complementary research phases: national desk research and qualitative focus group discussions. The desk research mapped existing evidence on youth and democracy in each national context. Focus groups then provided direct, qualitative insight into young people's lived experiences and perspectives.

The report is organised as follows: Section 2 provides country-by-country findings, integrating desk research context with focus group results for each partner country. Section 3 offers a thematic cross-national synthesis structured around the four core research themes. Section 4 draws conclusions and recommendations. The Annex includes the shared methodology, research materials, and partner information.

1.3 Research Implementation Overview

The table below summarises the focus groups conducted across the four partner countries. All groups used a shared framework of ten facilitated questions organised around four thematic areas.

Country	Age Group	Participants	Location	Date
Cyprus	Ages 15–17 (9 participants)	6 girls, 3 boys — private school students	Nicosia	20/03/2026
Cyprus	Ages 22–30 (7 participants)	3 women, 4 men — diverse backgrounds	Nicosia	25/03/2026
Italy	Ages 15–16 (7 participants)	2 women, 5 men	Genova	19/04/2026
Italy	Ages 20–28 (7 participants)	3 women, 3 men, 1 non-binary	Genova	28/03/2026
Lithuania	Ages 15–16 (7 participants)	6 female, 1 male — Kaunas area	Kaunas	12/05/2026
Lithuania	Ages 14–18 (14 participants)	10 female, 4 male — Jonava/Kaunas region	Jonava	05/06/2026
Spain	Ages 14–18 (7 participants)	Mixed — Comarruga	Comarruga, Catalonia	March 2026
Spain	Ages 18–30 (7 participants)	Mixed	Comarruga, Catalonia	18/04/2026

Note: Lithuania's two focus groups both engaged the 14–18 age group in different communities (Kaunas and Jonava). This design choice provides comparative insight within the same age cohort across different geographic and institutional settings within Lithuania.

2. Country-by-Country Findings

This section presents the key findings from each partner country, integrating desk research context with focus group results. Each country profile is structured around the four thematic areas of the UNMUTE research framework.

2.1 Cyprus

Context: Desk Research Highlights

Cyprus presents a distinctive national context shaped by its status as a divided, post-conflict society. The unresolved Cyprus issue continues to influence political attitudes, levels of trust, and how younger generations understand democracy, participation, and coexistence. Research by Psaltis et al. (2019) highlights how separate social and educational narratives shape young people's understanding of collective decision-making.

Eurobarometer data shows that a notable share of young Cypriots choose not to vote due to distrust in the political system. Civic participation is limited compared to EU averages: only 31% of young people in Cyprus report having taken part in initiatives aimed at changing society, compared to an EU average of 48%. Digital platforms have become important spaces for youth civic expression, though challenges around misinformation and unequal digital access persist — approximately 77% of respondents reported exposure to false or misleading information online.

Focus Group 1: Ages 15–17, Nicosia (9 participants)

For participants in this group, democracy is primarily understood through the concept of voting. Because they cannot yet vote, this creates a sense of distance — democracy is perceived as something that will become more relevant in the future. At the same time, participants showed a thoughtful understanding of democratic values beyond elections, including freedom of speech, rights, and responsibility. Several explicitly rejected the idea that democracy means unlimited freedom, emphasising the importance of respecting others.

A key concept that emerged was 'μέσο' — the influence of personal connections and informal networks in shaping political choices in Cyprus. Participants expressed that people often vote for someone they know rather than based on political ideas, creating a perception that democracy is not fully merit-based or fair. Unfulfilled political promises and a perceived lack of credibility in politicians added to a sense of disengagement.

School plays a central role as the main institutional space, but is seen as offering limited and disconnected opportunities. Young people felt their opinions are dismissed due to age — by older generations including within their own families — and that they do not know how to approach decision-makers beyond their immediate environment. Inequalities were clearly visible: migrants, non-native speakers, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were identified as facing additional barriers.

"We feel underestimated and excluded — we recognise the importance of democracy but don't yet experience ourselves as active participants within it."

— Cyprus, 15–17 age group

Focus Group 2: Ages 22–30, Nicosia (7 participants)

This group engaged with democracy as a lived reality, connecting it to socio-economic conditions, political accountability, and everyday struggles. Their tone was notably more critical and frustrated. Participants described decision-making as not fully transparent, shaped by political or economic interests, and offering what several called an 'illusion of participation' — formal mechanisms exist but real influence requires pressure, networks, or collective action.

Gender dynamics were particularly prominent. Women participants described experiencing sexism when expressing political opinions, especially online — finding their contributions judged on the basis of gender rather than content. Challenges for LGBTQI+ individuals and migrants were also raised, pointing to a broader understanding of how social identity shapes access to democratic participation.

This group demonstrated a wide civic repertoire: protests, volunteering, civil society engagement, artistic expression, and direct engagement with political processes. However, many felt their efforts do not lead to real change, producing frustration. Connection to the EU was felt primarily through mobility programmes, Erasmus, and cross-border opportunities, with the EU seen as more responsive and accessible than Cypriot domestic politics.

"Democracy, in theory, is a good system, but in practice it does not always work as it should."

— Cyprus, 22–30 age group

2.2 Italy

Context: Desk Research Highlights

Italy's desk research identifies four structural reasons behind low youth participation in democratic processes: lack of political representation, 'apparent abstention,' lack of trust, and the impact of precarious economic conditions ('bad jobs'). Only 0.25% of Italian parliament members are aged 25–29. The phenomenon of 'apparent abstention' describes how people who wish to vote are structurally prevented from doing so — by the absence of proxy voting, postal voting, early voting, or online voting mechanisms — particularly affecting young people who have moved away from home for study or work.

Economic instability is identified as a direct driver of civic disengagement: 86% of young Italians declare they have no influence on political decisions — the highest rate among analysed European countries — and only 29% believe electoral processes are mostly fair. One in three young Italians has no interest in politics, among the highest rates in Europe. Employed people talk more often about politics than unemployed people, indicating that labour market conditions directly shape democratic participation.

Focus Group 1: Ages 15–16, Genova (7 participants)

This group engaged thoughtfully with the concept of democratic space, defining it as a place where all people have voice, power, and influence — and where access is physical, economic, and social. Participants reflected on whether democracy requires consensus or only majority agreement, a philosophical question that revealed genuine civic thinking even among very young participants.

School was described as a space that should be democratic but is not. Political neutrality in schools was perceived as itself a political stance — and therefore false. Students felt unable to change things within school structures because 'teachers always have the last word.' They also observed hierarchical dynamics among students themselves, with voting and assemblies feeling formally democratic but functionally shaped by nepotism and factions. One participant shared a direct experience of a transphobic episode at school, illustrating how exclusion operates at multiple levels.

Social media was seen as both democratic (anonymity levels the playing field) and anti-democratic (it can be manipulative or dominated by certain voices). Participants, while

aware of high abstention rates, affirmed the necessity of voting while also exploring the idea of creating alternative democratic spaces — small, inclusive environments where everyone has the same resources and opportunities.

"School is perceived as completely apolitical — but its political neutrality is something fake and, for itself, political."

— Italy, 15–16 age group, Genova

Focus Group 2: Ages 20–28, Genova (7 participants)

This group expressed comprehensive distrust in political representatives, with elective democracy perceived as 'far and not representative of youth's needs.' All participants perceived the Italian government as not democratic — framing democracy as something they needed to seek outside of official government structures. Voting was seen as both a necessary right — one that people fought and died for — and as something that feels individual and limited in impact: 'a one among many.'

The 18–34 demographic was characterised as a minority within the electorate, making it structurally difficult for youth interests to be represented. Education about democracy and active citizenship was identified as absent, contributing directly to lower participation and voter turnout. A significant theme was collective burnout — the difficulty of sustaining civic mobilisation when people are already exhausted by economic precarity and survival pressures.

Building networks with 'functioning realities' — connecting with organisations and communities that are already making change — was identified as the key strategy for maintaining civic engagement. This sense of collectivity and solidarity was described as essential to feeling less isolated and more capable of impact.

"A democratic space is a space where all the people have voice, power and influence. It has to be accessible — physically, economically and socially."

— Italy, 20–28 age group, Genova

2.3 Lithuania

Context: Desk Research Highlights

In Lithuania, young people broadly recognise democratic values such as equality, rule of law, and freedom, but their engagement with democracy tends to be cautious and selective. Many demonstrate forms of 'passive' citizenship — voting or individual civic acts — while fewer engage in collective mobilisation or sustained activism. Only 39% of young people in Lithuania feel politically literate; 29% explicitly feel insufficiently familiar with democratic processes.

Trust in political institutions is structurally low: only 16% of the general population trust political parties, 20% trust the national parliament, and 32% trust government. Youth turnout in the 2024 European Parliament elections fell sharply to 18.25%, down from 43.86% in 2019 — a dramatic decline that signals significant disengagement from formal electoral politics. Lithuania's Civic Empowerment Index stood at 36.8/100 in 2024, with both actual and potential civic activity declining. Structural barriers cited include limited awareness of democratic processes, absence of direct dialogue channels with political representatives, and the complexity of political campaigns.

Focus Group 1: Ages 15–16, Kaunas (7 participants)

This group strongly associated democracy with freedom (laisvė) and equality (lygybė), confirmed through a Mentimeter word-cloud exercise. For these participants, democracy is not abstract: it is what allows them to express opinions without fear, participate in protests and campaigns, make free everyday choices, and vote when they turn 18. Several framed democracy in generational terms, noting they enjoy more freedoms than previous generations.

The group was clear-eyed about the limits of democratic inclusion in their lives. While Lithuania offers formal participation opportunities — school self-government, youth organisations, project-based activities — participants consistently reported that on the most important decisions, youth voices are not actually taken into account. An important geographic observation emerged: smaller towns were described as having closer, more genuine collaboration between authorities and young people, while bigger cities feel more distant and formal.

All participants had already engaged in civic action: protests, public parades, discussions, and volunteering. They identified clear enablers (project-based activities, teacher initiatives, school visits by politicians) and clear barriers (age-based discrimination, rights violations, adults not complying with procedures meant to protect youth voice). Direct experiences of being silenced were concrete and striking: refusal of entry to a public event with a politician, humiliation at a school meeting, threats of dismissal for expressing an opinion.

On the question of whether people their age have a place in democracy, the group was almost evenly split: 4 voted Yes, 3 voted No.

"Most current politicians are the age of our parents or grandparents and don't think we're suitable for this role; they believe we don't care, which is why most young people aren't interested in politics — there's no place for them."

— Lithuania, 15–16 age group, Kaunas

Focus Group 2: Ages 14–18, Jonava (14 participants)

This larger group confirmed and deepened the findings from the first focus group while introducing additional nuance. The Mentimeter word-cloud for this session was richer, with freedom and elections as the most prominent terms alongside justice, authority, parliament, honesty/integrity, citizenship, and free speech. The concrete, lived-experience dimension of democracy was emphasised: the freedom to express opinions, to travel without visas (Schengen), to elect school representatives, and to be a free citizen.

Notably, 74% of participants in this group answered 'Yes' when asked whether people their age genuinely have a place in democracy today — a considerably more optimistic response than the first Kaunas group, where the split was 4 to 3. This difference may reflect the larger group size, the slightly broader age range (including two 18-year-old first-time voters), and the Jonava community's strong existing connections to civic participation and EU projects.

The presence of two 18-year-old participants introduced a productive dynamic: participants who could already vote described the threshold as bringing additional responsibility and possibility. This highlighted the voting age boundary as the key perceived turning point in democratic inclusion — the moment when young people transition from civic interest to formal political agency.

Barriers remained consistent with the first group: age-based dismissal was the single most cited challenge, cited across nearly every discussion theme. Participants from smaller communities also noted that awareness of international youth opportunities is lower outside major cities — an important equity observation. The EU connection was particularly strong in this group, with travel freedom and EU-funded projects cited repeatedly as concrete ways democracy affects daily life.

"We are not listened to, we are too young and our opinion is not very important to them."

— Lithuania, 14–18 age group, Jonava

Across both Lithuanian focus groups, future engagement was consistently anticipated: voting at 18, continuing involvement in protests and campaigns, and remaining active in projects and organisations. Participants in Jonava also reflected on the potential for creating alternative democratic spaces at the local and community level, which could give young people a meaningful voice before they reach voting age.

2.4 Spain

Context: Desk Research Highlights

Spain's democratic system emerged from the transition following the Franco dictatorship in the late 1970s, which gives democracy a particular historical weight in the national context: it is valued partly because it was recently absent. Nevertheless, younger generations who have only known democracy express frustration that its institutions do not serve them. Trust in government and political institutions is moderate, sometimes below the OECD average, and a significant proportion of young Spaniards feel the political system does not adequately represent their interests.

Youth participation increasingly occurs through informal and digital channels, community initiatives, and social activism rather than traditional party politics. Environmental movements, feminist campaigns, and student mobilisations have attracted significant youth involvement. Structural barriers include youth unemployment, economic insecurity, complex political language, and limited opportunities for meaningful dialogue with decision-makers.

Focus Group 1: Ages 14–18, Comarruga (7 participants)

Participants in this group described what the facilitating organisation, Globers, identified as a 'citizenship gap': high awareness of democratic values combined with systematic exclusion from mechanisms of power. Democracy for this cohort is defined not by ballot boxes but by 'voice' — the freedom to be oneself and speak one's mind. They experience democracy's presence when allowed to negotiate rules at school, and its absence when they have no formal way to influence their local community's future.

The 'representation deficit' was sharp: participants see government (Madrid/Barcelona) as a distant entity that makes laws without knowing them. Local school directors were identified as the most powerful figures in their lives, yet communication with them is one-sided. A recurring complaint was that adults only listen to youth when they want to 'show off' a project, but never when a real problem is raised. One participant described the experience as being 'a decoration at school meetings.'

Digital platforms are the primary tool for civic expression, but participants were clear-eyed about their limits: posting on social media rarely leads to real-world changes, and the people

who could fix problems are probably not on Instagram. 'Adultcentrism' — the use of 'you're too young' to disqualify young people's logic and experience — was named as the primary barrier to engagement. The group expressed political fatigue even before reaching adulthood, having repeatedly been told to 'focus on homework and leave politics to the adults.'

"Politicians only remember we exist when they want to look cool on social media, but they don't ask us what we actually need in our neighborhood."

— Spain, 14–18 age group, Comarruga

Focus Group 2: Ages 18–30, Comarruga (7 participants)

This group described democracy as more than elections every few years — something that should mean being listened to regularly and having real influence over decisions. Several participants said democracy currently 'feels like a theory, not something we live every day.' Connections were drawn between democratic quality and lived issues such as housing costs, unstable jobs, access to quality education, and transport — areas where young people feel structurally powerless.

Trust in institutions was mixed: local organisations and schools were seen as more approachable than national governments or political parties. Barriers to participation discussed by this group included lack of time due to studies or work, the feeling that participation changes nothing, lack of information, complex political language, economic insecurity, and low confidence in institutions. Participants agreed that people from lower-income or migrant backgrounds face even greater obstacles.

Several participants shared experiences of being ignored because of their age — in schools, workplaces, and public settings. Despite this, participants were clear that youth voices are becoming stronger through digital platforms, activism, and community networks, and expressed readiness to contribute if institutions are willing to engage honestly. On the EU, the group felt a degree of connection through travel, education programmes, and freedom of movement, but described the EU as 'far away from everyday life' for those not actively engaged with European networks.

"Democracy is not only voting. It is being heard between elections too."

— Spain, 18–30 age group, Comarruga

3. Thematic Cross-National Synthesis

This section synthesises findings across all four countries, organised around the four UNMUTE research themes. For each theme, it presents cross-national convergences, notable differences or national specificities, and the implications of both for project activities.

3.1 Youth Understandings of Democracy and Democratic Values

Cross-national convergences

Across all four countries, **freedom** and **equality** are the defining concepts that come to mind when young people hear 'democracy.' This is consistent whether captured through a Mentimeter word cloud in Lithuania, written individual reflection in Spain, or moderated discussion in Cyprus and Italy. Young people are not disconnected from democratic values — they articulate them thoughtfully, personally, and with nuance.

Equally consistent is the gap between democratic values as principles and democracy as a lived experience. In all four contexts, participants recognised the importance of democracy while expressing frustration or disappointment with how it operates in practice. This dissonance — knowing what democracy should be, while not experiencing it — is arguably the defining emotional and political condition of youth democratic engagement across the four countries.

A second convergence is the developmental shift between age groups: younger participants (14–18) understand democracy primarily through the lens of voting, which they cannot yet do, creating a sense of deferral and exclusion. Older participants (18–30) engage with democracy as a lived reality, connecting it to socio-economic conditions, accountability, and everyday struggles. This developmental pattern is consistent across Cyprus, Italy, and Spain (where two age groups were compared directly), and suggested by the Lithuanian desk research data.

"Being 16 feels like being in a waiting room; you see the world moving but you aren't allowed to touch the controls."

— Spain, 14–18 age group, Comarruga

National differences and specificities

Cyprus stands out for the concept of 'μέσο' — the role of informal personal networks in shaping political choices — which participants across both age groups identified as a specific distortion of democratic fairness. This is a culturally specific challenge that does not appear in other national contexts, though related concerns about clientelism and political influence by vested interests are echoed elsewhere.

Italy is distinctive in the intellectual depth with which even the youngest participants engaged with questions of democratic theory — asking, for instance, whether majority rule alone constitutes democracy, or whether consensus is required. This philosophical engagement may reflect the specific educational context of the Genova focus group, or a broader Italian civic culture.

Lithuania's historical context gives a specific resonance to values of freedom of expression: participants explicitly noted that they enjoy freedoms their parents' or grandparents' generations did not have, positioning democracy partly as the negation of Soviet-era repression.

Spain's democratic experience — shaped by relatively recent memory of authoritarian rule — means that democracy is valued in a particular way: as precious because it was once absent. Yet this historical value coexists with frustration among younger generations who take democracy for granted as a system but feel excluded from its benefits.

Implications for project activities

Activities that start from participants' own values — rather than formal definitions of democracy — are more likely to engage young people effectively. Word-cloud and reflective exercises (as used in Lithuania and Spain respectively) demonstrate the value of making democratic values personal and concrete before moving to institutional or procedural discussion.

The near-universal association of democracy with freedom and equality provides a productive starting point for UNMUTE activities: young people already have a strong value base. The challenge is connecting those values to practical pathways for action.

3.2 Trust, Representation, and Relationship with Institutions

Cross-national convergences

Low and declining trust in political institutions is structural across all four countries, confirmed by both desk research data and focus group discussions. Across all contexts, young people describe institutions as distant, unresponsive, and shaped by interests that do not include theirs. The key shared mechanisms through which trust is damaged are:

- Tokenistic consultation — being formally invited to participate but finding that input has no traceable effect on decisions;
- Age-based dismissal — having opinions discounted specifically because of youth;
- Unfulfilled promises — experiencing the gap between what politicians say and what they do;
- Opaque decision-making — not knowing how decisions are made or who is accountable.

School is the primary institutional space for the 14–18 age group across all countries, and in every national context it is described as offering participation in form but not in substance. The gap between what school governance structures promise (student voice, assemblies, elections) and what they deliver (teacher authority, hierarchical decisions, nepotism) is a consistent finding.

"I feel like a decoration in school meetings — I am there so they can say they listened to us, but nothing ever changes after I speak."

— Spain, 14–18 age group, Comarruga

National differences and specificities

The severity of institutional distrust varies across countries, with Italy appearing as the most acute case: desk research shows 86% of young Italians believe they have no influence on political decisions, the highest rate in Europe. Lithuania shows the sharpest recent decline in youth electoral participation, with European Parliament election turnout dropping from 43.86% in 2019 to 18.25% in 2024. Cyprus and Spain show more moderate but still concerning levels of disengagement.

Lithuania presents a counterintuitive finding absent from other national contexts: smaller towns were described as offering closer, more genuine collaboration between authorities and young people, in contrast to the more impersonal experience in larger cities. This geographic dimension of trust — the idea that institutional proximity can positively shape youth-institution relationships — is a finding worth exploring further.

Italy is unique in its inclusion of a non-binary participant and in making explicit the experience of LGBTQI+ individuals in school environments, including a specific account of transphobic treatment. This illustrates how institutional distrust is not only about democratic systems in the abstract but can be rooted in very personal, identity-based experiences of exclusion.

Comparative snapshot

Dimension	Cyprus	Italy	Lithuania	Spain
Trust level	Low; linked to 'μέσσο' & unfulfilled promises	Very low; 86% feel no political influence	Low & declining; EP turnout 18.25% (2024)	Moderate-low; below OECD average
School experience	Formal opportunities, not connected to real decisions	Formally democratic, functionally hierarchical	Formal voice exists; smaller towns more responsive	One-sided communication; youth as 'decorations'
Key barrier to trust	Informal networks ('μέσσο') distort democracy	Structural exclusion + precarious economy	Politicians seen as "parents' generation"	Adults listen only to 'show off' projects

Implications for project activities

Rebuilding trust requires more than consultation exercises — it requires demonstrating that youth input has consequences. UNMUTE activities should include explicit feedback mechanisms: when young people contribute to a process, they should receive clear information about how their input was used or why it could not be acted upon. Without this feedback loop, even well-designed participatory processes risk reinforcing the tokenism participants already describe.

3.3 Experiences of and Barriers to Civic Participation

Cross-national convergences

Young people across all four countries are not passive or disengaged. They are already participating — in protests, volunteering, student organisations, online activism, and community initiatives. The problem is not absence of will, but absence of accessible, effective, and genuinely responsive channels.

The barriers to participation identified across all four countries cluster into three categories:

- Structural barriers: voting age restrictions, legal exclusion of non-citizens, economic precarity, lack of time, absent or inaccessible information, complex institutional processes;
- Cultural/attitudinal barriers: age-based dismissal, the 'you're too young' argument, assumptions of youth apathy, fear of social judgment or harassment, low confidence;
- Inequality-based barriers: compounded disadvantages faced by migrants, young women, LGBTQI+ individuals, people from low-income backgrounds, and rural youth.

Across all countries, the groups most consistently identified as facing the greatest difficulties are: migrants and non-native speakers; young people from economically precarious backgrounds; young women (particularly regarding online harassment and sexist dismissal); LGBTQI+ individuals; and young people from rural or peripheral areas.

National differences and specificities

Italy's concept of 'apparent abstention' is the most structurally specific finding across the four national contexts — a systemic failure in electoral design that prevents people who want to vote from doing so. This phenomenon particularly affects young people who have moved

away from home for study or work, and represents a structural injustice that participation campaigns alone cannot address. It requires legislative change.

Italy also stands out for the explicit link it draws between economic precarity and civic disengagement. The research shows that young people working in precarious conditions ('bad jobs') are less able to engage politically — not because they don't care, but because they lack the time, energy, and stability that civic engagement requires. This structural connection between labour market conditions and democratic participation is important for understanding youth disengagement beyond attitudinal explanations.

"Many young people care, but they are tired or too busy surviving."

— Spain, 18–30 age group, Comarruga

Spain's focus groups introduced the concept of 'adultcentrism' — the systematic use of age as a reason to disqualify young people's reasoning and experience — as a named cultural barrier. This concept captures something present in all four country findings but made most explicit in Spain.

Lithuania's geographic finding — that rural youth face lower awareness of international participation opportunities, particularly EU-level programmes — adds an important spatial dimension to the inequality analysis. Access to civic participation is not uniform even within countries.

Implications for project activities

Effective participation support must address all three categories of barriers, not only informational ones. Knowing how to participate is not sufficient if structural barriers (economic pressure, legal exclusion) or cultural barriers (age-based dismissal, fear of judgment) remain in place. UNMUTE activities should be designed to lower the cost of participation — in time, confidence, and logistical terms — and should actively work to include those who face compounded disadvantages, rather than defaulting to participants who are already most engaged.

A key insight across all four countries: the young people who most need meaningful participation opportunities are often the hardest to reach through standard programme design. Migrants, rural youth, economically precarious participants, and those who have previously experienced dismissal or exclusion require targeted outreach and adapted formats.

3.4 Youth Voice, Civic Expression, and Future Engagement

Cross-national convergences

Social media and digital platforms feature across all four countries as important spaces for civic expression — and everywhere with the same important qualifications. Young people use digital platforms to express opinions, share information, organise, and maintain political awareness. For those excluded from formal institutions, digital spaces offer a degree of visibility not available elsewhere. But participants in every country also express a clear awareness that visibility is not the same as influence.

"I see something unfair, I post it on my story, but I know the people who can fix it are probably not even on Instagram."

— Spain, 14–18 age group, Comarruga

Experiences of being silenced — directly and concretely, not just as a general impression — are documented in every country. In Lithuania: refusal of entry to open political events, humiliation at school meetings, threats of dismissal. In Spain: being told to 'focus on homework and leave politics to the adults.' In Cyprus: sexist dismissal of women's political contributions. In Italy: transphobic treatment at school. These are not abstract barriers but specific, memorable events that shaped participants' willingness to engage in the future. Their specificity and recurrence across four different national contexts is striking.

The EU emerges across all four countries as a broadly positive reference point, particularly for the 14–18 age group, for whom the EU is associated with freedom of movement, Erasmus, youth programmes, and international opportunity. The EU is often experienced as more accessible and more responsive than national political institutions — a finding with clear implications for how UNMUTE, as a European project, can position its own activities.

National differences and specificities

Lithuania stands out for the strength and concreteness of the EU connection, particularly in the second focus group (Jonava), where multiple participants cited the freedom to travel without visas as a direct, daily way that democracy affects their lives. The EU's practical benefits are felt personally and not just abstractly, making it a particularly strong entry point for civic engagement in the Lithuanian context.

Italy is distinctive in its emphasis on collective network-building as the primary strategy for sustained civic engagement. Rather than focusing on individual participation acts, Italian participants of both age groups emphasised the importance of connecting with 'functioning realities' — organisations and movements already making change — as a way to feel less isolated and more capable of impact. This collective, solidarity-based model of civic engagement differs somewhat from the more individualised digital activism model described in Spain, or the project-based model emphasised in Lithuania.

Cyprus's older age group (22–30) introduced the most developed critique of institutional participation, including the concept of an 'illusion of participation' — the idea that democratic mechanisms exist not to enable genuine influence but to give the appearance of inclusion. This is the most politically sophisticated critique of tokenism across the four countries, and points to a deepening disillusionment among young adults who have had more direct experience of participatory processes.

Spain's younger group made the most explicit connection between civic ambition and everyday local environment: one participant who tried to suggest a more sustainable waste system for their neighbourhood was told to 'focus on homework first.' This moment captures the 'citizenship gap' — between civic awareness and civic capacity — in a particularly sharp and personal way.

Implications for project activities

Future UNMUTE activities should take seriously the EU as a civic asset for young people — it represents something more accessible, more positive, and more closely associated with real opportunities than national political institutions in all four countries. Building on this connection, while also helping young people understand the EU as a democratic system they can engage with (not just benefit from), could be a powerful framing for project activities.

Activities should create genuine spaces for young people to share and process experiences of being silenced — not simply to document grievance, but to validate those experiences, build confidence, and connect participants with peers and structures that take their voices seriously.

4. Comparative Overview: Similarities, Differences, and Implications

The following table provides a structured comparative overview of the key dimensions explored across all four countries, drawing together the main findings into a format that supports strategic planning for UNMUTE project activities.

Theme / Dimension	Cyprus	Italy	Lithuania	Spain
Democracy association	Voting, freedom, rights; shaped by 'μέσο'	Voice, access, power; philosophical depth even in 14–18	Freedom, equality; EU travel; historical freedom framing	Voice over ballot box; EU as future gateway
Place of youth in democracy (14–18)	Distant — waiting for voting age	Impossible to change; school as anti-democratic	Divided (Kaunas 4/3 yes/no; Jonava 74% yes)	Systematic exclusion; 'citizenship gap'
Institutional trust level	Low; personalised networks distort fairness	Very low; structural disillusionment	Low & sharply declining; EP turnout collapse	Mixed; local orgs more trusted than national
School experience	Limited, disconnected from real decisions	Hierarchical, anti-democratic in practice	Formal voice; smaller towns more responsive	One-sided; youth as decorations
Key structural barrier	Informal networks + limited civic ed	'Apparent abstention' + precarious labour	Age gatekeeping + low political literacy (39%)	Adultcentrism + economic precarity
Inequality focus	Migrants, SES, non-native speakers	LGBTQI+, migrants, economically precarious	Rural/urban divide in opportunity access	Migrants, lower-income families
Digital participation	Important; misinformation challenge (77%)	Both democratic (anonymity) and anti-democratic	Active; but civic intent doesn't always become action	Primary tool; acknowledged as limited impact
Experiences of silencing	Sexism for women; dismissal by age	Transphobia at school; voting felt futile	Denied entry to events; threats for opinions	Told 'focus on homework'; local official dismissal
EU connection	Positive esp. 14–18; mobility & Erasmus	Structural opportunity beyond Italian state	Strong & concrete; travel freedom cited directly	Future gateway; felt distant from daily life
Future engagement intent	Active, with frustration (18–30)	Network-building; alternative democratic spaces	High; voting at 18; local alternative spaces	Ready to contribute; need institutions to meet halfway

4.1 Strongest Cross-National Convergences

The following five patterns are present in all four national contexts and represent the most robust findings of this research phase:

- Young people have strong democratic values but experience democratic systems as exclusionary — the value-practice gap is universal;
- Tokenistic listening is the central frustration: formal inclusion without substantive influence generates cynicism more than outright exclusion does;
- Age-based dismissal ('you're too young') is the most consistently cited barrier across all ages, all countries, and all institutional settings;
- The EU is a more positive reference point than national politics for the 14–18 age group across all four countries;
- Structural inequalities shape who can participate: migrants, young women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and those facing economic precarity face compounded barriers.

4.2 Most Significant National Differences

While convergences are striking, national differences are equally important and should shape how UNMUTE activities are designed in each country context:

- Italy's 'apparent abstention' phenomenon is unique and structural — it requires systemic advocacy, not just civic education;
- Cyprus's 'μέσο' dynamic represents a specifically Cypriot form of democratic distortion, rooted in the island's political culture and post-conflict context;
- Lithuania's sharp youth electoral turnout decline and low political literacy rate (39%) indicate a particularly acute civic education need, though the country also shows stronger EU engagement at a practical level than any other partner context;
- Spain's 'adultcentrism' concept is named and theorised most clearly by Spanish participants, offering a conceptual tool useful across all partner contexts;
- Italy's emphasis on collective burnout and the need for network-based solidarity as a civic strategy is a distinctive contribution that could inform how UNMUTE builds lasting community across partner countries.

4.3 Implications for Project Activities

Drawing together the cross-national comparative analysis, the following strategic implications emerge for the design and delivery of UNMUTE project activities:

Start from values, not institutions

Since young people across all four countries have a strong value base (freedom, equality, voice) but limited connection to institutional structures, activities should begin from values and work outward to practical pathways — not the other way around.

Create genuine feedback loops

The single most damaging experience across all four countries is being consulted and then ignored. Every UNMUTE activity involving youth input must include a transparent mechanism for feeding back how that input was used — or explaining honestly why it was not.

Address the digital-structural gap

Young people are digitally active but structurally unheard. Activities should bridge digital expression and institutional responsiveness — helping young people not only express themselves online but connect those expressions to offline advocacy, institutional dialogue, and decision-making processes.

Actively include those facing compounded barriers

Migrants, young women, LGBTQI+ individuals, economically precarious youth, and those from rural areas are consistently identified as facing the greatest barriers. Programme design must actively account for these groups — through targeted outreach, financial accessibility, language support, safe environments, and adapted formats.

Leverage the EU connection

The EU is the most consistently positive institutional reference point across all four countries. UNMUTE activities that are explicitly European in character — connecting young people across national contexts, building on EU funding and mobility programmes, and positioning young people as European citizens — may generate stronger engagement than activities framed primarily at the national level.

Build networks, not just events

Italy's emphasis on connecting with 'functioning realities' — and the broader finding across all countries that sustained engagement requires community, not just individual action — suggests that UNMUTE should aim to build lasting networks between participants, not only to organise discrete events or activities.

5. Conclusions

The UNMUTE project set out to ask how young people across four European countries relate to democracy today. The first research phase — desk research and focus groups in Cyprus, Italy, Lithuania, and Spain — provides a rich, textured, and at times unsettling answer.

Young people know what democracy should be. They can articulate democratic values clearly and personally, in word clouds and written reflections, in Lithuanian and Spanish, in school halls and educational fairs. What they cannot always see is how to move from values to voice, from voice to influence, and from influence to change. The channels available to them are too narrow, too unresponsive, and too often designed to give the appearance of inclusion without its substance.

Yet the same research also documents resilience, civic motivation, and a genuine desire to contribute. Participants across all four countries expressed clear intention to remain engaged — to vote when they can, to protest when something is wrong, to build networks when formal channels fail. They are not waiting to be invited. They are already acting. The question is whether democratic institutions and civil society organisations like UNMUTE's partners will meet them with the genuine responsiveness they deserve.

What is perhaps most striking about this cross-national synthesis is how consistent the findings are. Despite the very different histories, political cultures, and economic conditions of Cyprus, Italy, Lithuania, and Spain, young people in all four countries arrive at the same

core experience: they are invited in but not listened to, consulted but not empowered, valued rhetorically but not included substantively.

Addressing this requires not just better communication or more youth-friendly events. It requires a genuine shift in how democratic institutions relate to young people — one that the UNMUTE project, through its next phases of activities, advocacy, and cross-national network-building, can meaningfully support.

6. Recommendations

6.1 For UNMUTE Project Activities

- Design all participatory activities with explicit feedback mechanisms, so that young people can track how their input influenced outcomes;
- Ensure both age groups (14–18 and 18–30) are included in cross-country activities, creating opportunities for intergenerational peer exchange;
- Develop targeted outreach to reach young people facing compounded barriers: migrants, rural youth, economically precarious participants, and those who have previously experienced exclusion;
- Use the EU connection as a strategic asset — position UNMUTE activities as concretely European, building on the mobility, exchange, and opportunity dimensions that young people already value;
- Build lasting networks between participants across countries and over time, rather than organising only discrete events.

6.2 For Civic Education and Schools

- Advocate for civic education that goes beyond knowledge of institutions to include practical skills: how to raise concerns formally, how to engage with media and decision-makers, how to organise collectively;
- Support teachers and school administrators to create genuinely participatory school environments — not just formal consultation structures that replicate the tokenism young people already critique;
- Protect the rights of young people to participate in public events, school meetings, and civic discussions, with clear enforcement mechanisms — the specific incidents documented in Lithuania and Spain are not isolated cases.

6.3 For Institutions and Decision-Makers

- Establish regular, structured dialogue between elected officials and young people, particularly in larger cities where the relationship currently feels most distant;
- Address structural barriers to participation, including Italy's 'apparent abstention' through electoral reform, and broader barriers of economic precarity, logistical inaccessibility, and institutional complexity;
- Take seriously the evidence that treating youth disengagement as apathy is inaccurate and self-defeating — young people are engaged, often on different terms and through different channels than formal electoral politics;

- Create and protect spaces where young women, LGBTQI+ individuals, migrants, and rural youth can participate on equal terms, addressing the specific barriers these groups face rather than assuming a universal youth experience.

Annex: Methodology and Research Materials

A.1 Research Design

This synthesis draws on two complementary research methods: national desk research and qualitative focus group discussions. The desk research phase involved systematic reviews of European and national sources — surveys, academic literature, policy reports, and grey literature — to establish the national context in each country. The focus group discussions used a shared set of ten facilitated questions covering the four thematic areas, allowing for cross-national comparison while remaining flexible to national specificities.

Each country conducted two focus groups — one with participants aged 14–18 and one with participants aged 18–30 — with the exception of Lithuania, which conducted both focus groups with the 14–18 age group in different communities (Kaunas and Jonava). This means that Lithuania's 18–30 perspective is addressed through desk research but not directly through qualitative primary data. This limitation is noted throughout the analysis where relevant.

Several focus groups used supplementary participatory techniques: Mentimeter interactive polling (both Lithuanian groups, providing quantitative snapshots of responses and word-cloud visualisations); Energizer physical activities (Spain, to build group cohesion); reflective writing exercises (Spain, to allow individual responses without peer influence); and structured oral questioning (all countries).

A.2 Shared Focus Group Questions

Youth Perceptions of Democracy and Democratic Values

- Q1. When you hear the word democracy, what does it mean to you, and how does it affect your daily life?
- Q2. Do you feel people your age really have a place in democracy today? Why or why not?

Trust, Representation and Relationship with Institutions

- Q3. Who do you think makes the most important decisions that affect your life?
- Q4. How do those decisions show up in your everyday life, if at all?
- Q5. Do you feel young people are listened to by those decision-makers, or mostly ignored? What makes you feel that way?

Experiences and Barriers to Civic Participation

- Q6. When something feels unfair or important to you, what do you usually do?
- Q7. Have you ever taken part in anything to try to change something?
- Q8. What makes it easier or harder for young people to get involved, and who faces the biggest difficulties?

Youth Voice, Civic Expression and Future Engagement

- Q9. Have you ever felt ignored, excluded, or silenced when you tried to express your opinion?
- Q10. Do you feel connected in any way to Europe or the EU? Does it feel relevant to your future?

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