

Annex 1

Access to Public Information in the European Union

Priority Transparency Needs from Youth Perspective

Access to information is part of both citizens' participation and citizens' control

Jean-Paul Pinon, Director of WeCitizens
SIA4Y project partner

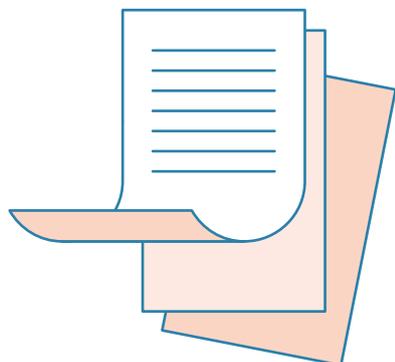
Young people act in a different manner: quicker feedback, etc. The new technology offers the potential to offer additional channels to satisfy the needs of all. There is a momentum and we should be quick enough to grasp the opportunity to enhance democracy.

Assya Kavrakova, European Citizens Action Service,
Executive Director
SIA4Y project partner

Introduction

The right to information is a human right. For young people, this is a special right because in many cases the ability to exercise the right to information opens up possibilities for young people to exercise other human rights. Being able to find the right information can mean taking the first step to solving the problems European youth face today and encourage them to civic activity.

In the conditions of information overload, characteristic of the information society and knowledge-based economy, a particularly important challenge is to teach the young generation of Europeans how to recognise and act on high-quality information using all available communication and information tools. The success of this type of action depends on many factors. First of all, young people should be given better access to reliable information, their ability to critically evaluate information should be supported, and they should be involved in constructive and participatory dialogue. We should try to understand them and take action to lower the barriers they encounter in an attempt to be active in public space.



This is especially important in the case of the European Union. The social deficit of democracy this organisation suffers from requires many actions, taken both by the European institutions, politicians, but also all Europeans who benefit from the effects of European integration and support its further development.

European youth is a social group that requires special attention first and foremost because of the role it will play in the future – it is young people who will decide on the shape of the future European Union. In this context, information about youth’s interest in political and public activity is becoming alarming. In the last decade it has decreased significantly. In addition, 14.2% of the European Union’s population aged 15–29 are NEETS (unemployed, not in education or training).

At the same time, European youth is a very diverse social group with great potential, which should be properly recognised and unlocked for the benefit of the entire European Union. This will happen only when young people from being informed begin to take part in active two-way communication to finally consciously participate in the political and public life of the European Union.

For this to happen, youth’s voice should be heard.

If European youth’s right of access to public information is to be more effective, we assumed that it is essential to find the answer to the following questions:

- Do European young people think that the right to public information makes public institutions more open and accountable?
- Is this right useful to them?
- Are RTI and ATI a condition for the functioning of democracy, transparency of operation of institutions and good governance?
- How can RTI/ATI overcome the problem of youth’s lack of trust in public institutions?
- Does European youth feel the addressee of public information of the European Union?
- Where does youth gain knowledge about RTI/ATI from? Is it useful?
- What increases young peoples’ interest in RTI/ATI, and what discourages them?

Methods

Transparency needs were formulated on the basis of the analysis of opinions of young Europeans who took part in meetings (discussions, workshops, lectures) and the survey conducted from March 2018 to January 2020 as part of the project *Strengthening the civil society rights by information access for European youth (SIA4Y)* as well as on the basis of correspondence and discussions with the project partners: SOCIALAS INOVACIJAS CENTRS Latvia; WeCitizens – WijBurgers – NousCitoyens Belgium; Aktiivinen Eurooppalainen Kansalainen Suomi Ry Finland; Stowarzyszenie Gmin RP Euroregion Baltyk Poland; Eesti Naisuurimus- ja Teabekeskus Estonia.

During the execution of the SIA4Y project, in all partner countries 9 meetings took place, in which in total over 400 young people participated. Each meeting with the young had a theoretical dimension as well as a practical one engaging the participants. The general purpose of the meetings was to promote knowledge about the right of access to information. The meetings differed in their specific objectives, which, taking into account national specificities, the activities of organisations dealing with transparency and working with the young, set out their own agendas of meeting topics. The analysis covered the issues and forms of cooperation with young people during these meetings. In addition, a quantitative survey was conducted using a questionnaire “Youth about experience with Freedom of Information”, obtaining a total of 105 responses meeting the formal criteria. The respondents were aged 12–25.

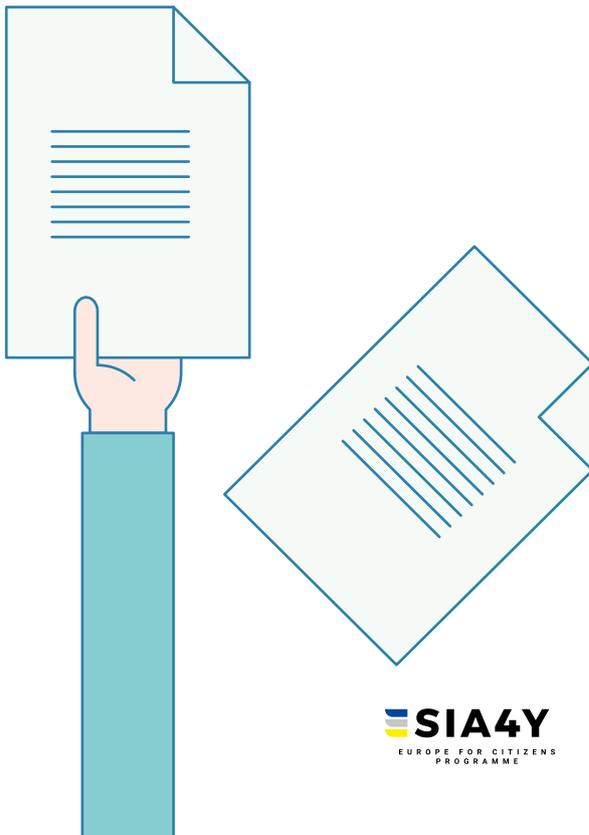
Each of the meetings was preceded by lectures on the right of access to information given by people actively working for human rights and freedom of information. The thematic areas of the lectures covered the right to information (RTI), the importance of freedom of access to information for democracy – the FOI perspective and the possibility of exercising the right of access to information (ATI).

The parts of meetings that engaged young people were characterised by great diversity. There were three issues raised during active cooperation with young people, namely:

- involvement of young people in the decision-making process on the example of the civic budget and youth councils;
- development of communication tools that facilitate the use of ATI and those thanks to which young people will become a group of active citizens;
- proactive search for information.

Multidisciplinary teams were an important aspect of the workshops. The young cooperated with representatives of various professions and different ages and with diverse experiences. Among them were youth policy experts, social activists dealing with youth activation and social participation as well as employees of institutions – offices and universities.

The project partners provided information containing answers to the following questions: What is Freedom of Information in your country? When can I use Freedom of Information to access documents (local level, e.g. public institutions)? How can do I lodge a Freedom of Information Application (local level, e.g. public institutions)? What fees are required to lodge my application? and RTI/ATI data and statistics, laws, research papers (with case study), projects, education programs about RTI/ATI for youth, list of youth institutions, organisations, councils. An important source of information on the attitude of young people to the right of access to information were the partners' opinions about the level of awareness of youth about RTI/ATI and examples of methods of raising of awareness in this case.



Results

Universal access to information is a driving force for transparent, accountable and effective governance, and paves the way for freedom of expression, cultural and linguistic diversity, and participation in public life.

Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO

AWARENESS

We know how important access to public information is for healthy democracy

KNOWLEDGE

We know that we have the right to access information, but we feel that you only say what you want to tell us

EDUCATION

We do not know what we can look for, so we look for what we think we can find

ATTITUDES

We are motivated when the matter concerns us personally and we are able to assess the sense of our commitment to solving our problems

TRUST

The more we trust institutions, politicians, officials, the more we believe in the sense of exercising the right of access to information

TOOLS

The easier the tools, methods (forms, applications) to access information, the more motivation we have to use it

SUPPORT

We need support in using access to public information

The first: AWARENESS

We know how important access to public information is for healthy democracy

Young people agree that the right to information is of great importance for the functioning of healthy democracy (73%) and recognise the right of access to information as an important value for their age group (73%). There is no doubt as to the relationship between ATI and the functioning of democracy and good governance. They also agree that FOI contributes to increasing the transparency of power (67%).

The second: KNOWLEDGE

We know that we have the right to access information, but we feel that you only say what you want to tell us

Half (51%) of the respondents declared that they had heard about the right to information. Of this, almost half had used ATI (47%) in the application mode, mainly to educational institutions (25%) and local government (19%). On the other hand, the respondents assess the possibilities of enforcing their rights much worse. Over half (56%) declared that if institutions do not want to publish information, they will find a way to hide it. Indirectly, this indicates a lack of confidence in public institutions, which decide by themselves whether they disclose information or not.

The third: EDUCATION

We do not know what we can look for, so we look for what we think we can find

Half (51%) of the respondents declared that they had heard about the right to information. Of this, almost half had sought ATI (47%) in the application mode, mainly to educational institutions (25%) and local government (19%). The majority of the respondents (82%) who confirmed that they had made an inquiry, received an answer. The lack of answer had not compelled them to file a complaint. It is interesting that among the respondents who had heard about ATI but had not used the application mode, the vast majority (76%) indicated that they had had no questions as the reason, and only a few that they had not known how to ask (10%) or had not known that they could ask (14%). Discussions with the young people taking part in the project pointed to the importance of systematic education about civil rights, among which the right to information appears as a tool improving democracy. The fact that only half of the respondents had heard about the right to

information, and on the other hand, again half (47%) had submitted a request for access to information may indicate that a large part of the requests might have been part of a school task. This is confirmed by the nature of the institutions to which applications had been submitted and the high level of satisfaction with the feedback received, as well as the age of the respondents. In the majority of cases young people exercise this right only at the level of educational institutions without being aware of for what other purposes and how they could exercise this right.

The fourth: ATTITUDES

We are motivated when the matter concerns us personally and we are able to assess the sense of our commitment to solving our problems

Advocacy in one's own case or of a peer group is the biggest motivation to take action in the field of seeking public information. The lack of sense of being a partner, a subject in relation with decision-makers is a demotivating factor. Young people notice the prevalence of one-way communication defining it as the dominance of "talking heads" who mass produce information without expecting feedback. This behaviour neutralizes civic attitudes of young people, they feel that their voice does not count. Motivation to being committed depends also on the possibility of truly involving young people in solving problems in their immediate environment. On the other hand, young people also show a lack of knowledge that reduces their possibilities of exercising the right to information.

The fifth: TRUST

The more we trust institutions, politicians, officials, the more we believe in the sense of exercising the right of access to information

The young clearly expressed their lack of trust in institutions, officials, the administration and politicians. They pointed to the examples of politicians avoiding publishing public information. Distrust was indicated as one of the reasons for not exercising the right to information. The lack of trust intensifies the sense of the lack of influence, which contributes to the belief about the senselessness of action. Among critical remarks there was also the conviction that institutions can manipulate. Youth often stressed that the dominance of politics in media reports fills them with aversion to politics.

The sixth: TOOLS

The easier the tools, methods (forms, applications) to access information, the more motivation we have to use it

Among the tools promoting and facilitating FOI and RTI/ATI, young people emphasised the role of public institutions, on which, first and foremost, the quality, transparency and value of published information depend. In the respondents' opinion, institution's publications are unintelligible, the young explicitly stated that information provided should be easy to search, comparable, effortlessly navigated, in friendly formats, with visible contact details.

The seventh: SUPPORT

We need support in using access to public information

In the questionnaire survey, young people declared that the main source of knowledge about ATI is school (30% of responses) and the Internet (16%) as well as the mass media (15%), and only a few pointed to NGOs (2%). However, in the discussion, they had no doubt that investigative and news media, especially local ones, and human rights and transparency organisations are key to supporting and controlling the integrity and openness of power. NGOs act as an intermediary in supporting, initiating and teaching how to navigate public data. They pointed to the role of youth organisations whose activities have a local dimension that allows them to act in their own environment.



Recommendations

To get a youngster more involved in FoI, give him opportunities to find easily information he is personally interested in.

Johannes Filter, portal FragDenStaat <https://fragdenstaat.de/>

Transparency is one of the basic principles of healthy democracy and one of the most important elements of building trust in democratic institutions and processes. The European Union, which values democracy very highly, treats transparency as a condition for maintaining Europeans' trust and further support for the process of European integration. The European institutions also understand the importance of the evaluation of public policies for increasing the effectiveness of EU policy processes. Hence the openness to listening to opinions of citizens of the Member States.

The below recommendations for improving transparency in the European Union are based on the opinions of young Europeans participating in the SIA4Y project co-financed by the *Europe for Citizens* programme.

1. Strengthen value of transparency and protect transparency as a value in the European Union

We understand the value of democracy and the role of transparency that gives us an opportunity to use it. In our families and communities in which we live, there is still a memory of those who fought for freedom and democracy. This does not mean, however, that this remembrance will be permanent. We are afraid that it may be ruptured. We can already see worrying trends undermining democracy by examples of destroying transparency. We observe growing populist attitudes, propagation of propaganda and manipulation of information. Therefore, we believe that not only should the value of transparency be increased, but also transparency as a value should be protected.

2. Create an organisational culture in public institutions that gives Europeans more chances to exercise their RTI/ATI

The right to access information is not enough to be able to use it fully. Institutions, administrations, officials and politicians are not always prepared, they do not always have the appropriate

knowledge and tools to understand that great interest in public information is beneficial for both sides: us Europeans and you officials and politicians. Without a two-sided understanding of the value of this right and commitment to creating conditions for exercising it, it will be difficult to take full advantage of the benefits of RTI/ATI. The negative attitude of the administration to our questions about public information should be changed. Perceiving us as petitioners seeking arguments against the institution we ask, and not as active and aware citizens who exercise their right to public information in order to independently solve problems related to functioning in the public and political sphere will lead to the reproduction of examples of hiding information.

3. Invest in and promote the value of civic education by caring about the evaluation of its implementation and functioning in European Union countries

It will be very difficult to prepare us to be active EU citizens without public support for the principles of democracy resulting from investing in civic education and assessing its quality at various levels of education. Civic education varies from country to country. We do not learn how to be aware and active citizens, how to exercise our rights, only what they are. We have the impression that nobody assesses the effectiveness of civic education curricula. And in our opinion, civic education is a condition for improving the quality of public debate.

4. Show the value of RTI/ATI for solving current problems of young people

We are motivated when the matter concerns us personally and we are able to assess the sense of our commitment when we see a chance for solving our problems. Contents about access to public information often does not indicate us as potential recipients. It is difficult for us to deduce from it what benefits we could derive from exercising RTI/ATI apart from educational institutions. It should be remembered that this right applies to various social and age groups and should be presented as such. The language of the message and its substantive content should be addressed to us in such a way that we can see what youth problems can be solved by exercising it instead of being stuck in a sense of exclusion.

5. Treat young people as future voters and decision-makers, build trust

You say that we are the future of Europe and a guarantee of further development of the integration process. We often have the impression that this is an empty declaration. If we do not have an active voting right yet, we are not treated as recipients of electoral campaigns or public strategies, policies and programmes. As a result our trust diminishes. We assess positively the attempt to create youth policy of the European Union and the development of structures of youth institutions, such as youth councils at the level of the Member States. However, a large part of us cannot participate in them. To build trust between us and the European institutions, attempts should be made to democratise the possibility of participating in this important, authentic school of participation.

6. Propose exercising the right to access information by means of intuitive, simple and available tools and methods (forms, applications)

It should also be remembered that for our generation, *good information* must first of all be useful, which means that its content must be valuable to young people. Secondly, it must be available. This means, among other things, that it should meet the requirements of being democratic. It should be free of charge or relatively cheap and enable all of us to easily understand its content. It should also meet operability requirements, which means that it must be up-to-date and obtained on time. For us, the time of obtaining information determines its value. Moreover, it should pertain to the issue we are looking for. It should not omit important elements. For us, *good information* means primarily understandable, or intelligible information. It must be factual and come from a reliable source. It should also be correct, verifiable, supplementable and expandable.

7. Remember to support organisations that help us to exercise RTI/ATI

We know that free and professional media and NGOs are the guardians of democracy. Irrespective of whether we live in a small town or the capital, easy access to them will be considerable support and a chance for us to exercise the right of access to public information. We need this support, especially at the first

stage of our civic adventure. We are supporters of non-formal education affording opportunities to learn on examples that refer to our real problems, the solutions for which we are looking for here and now.

