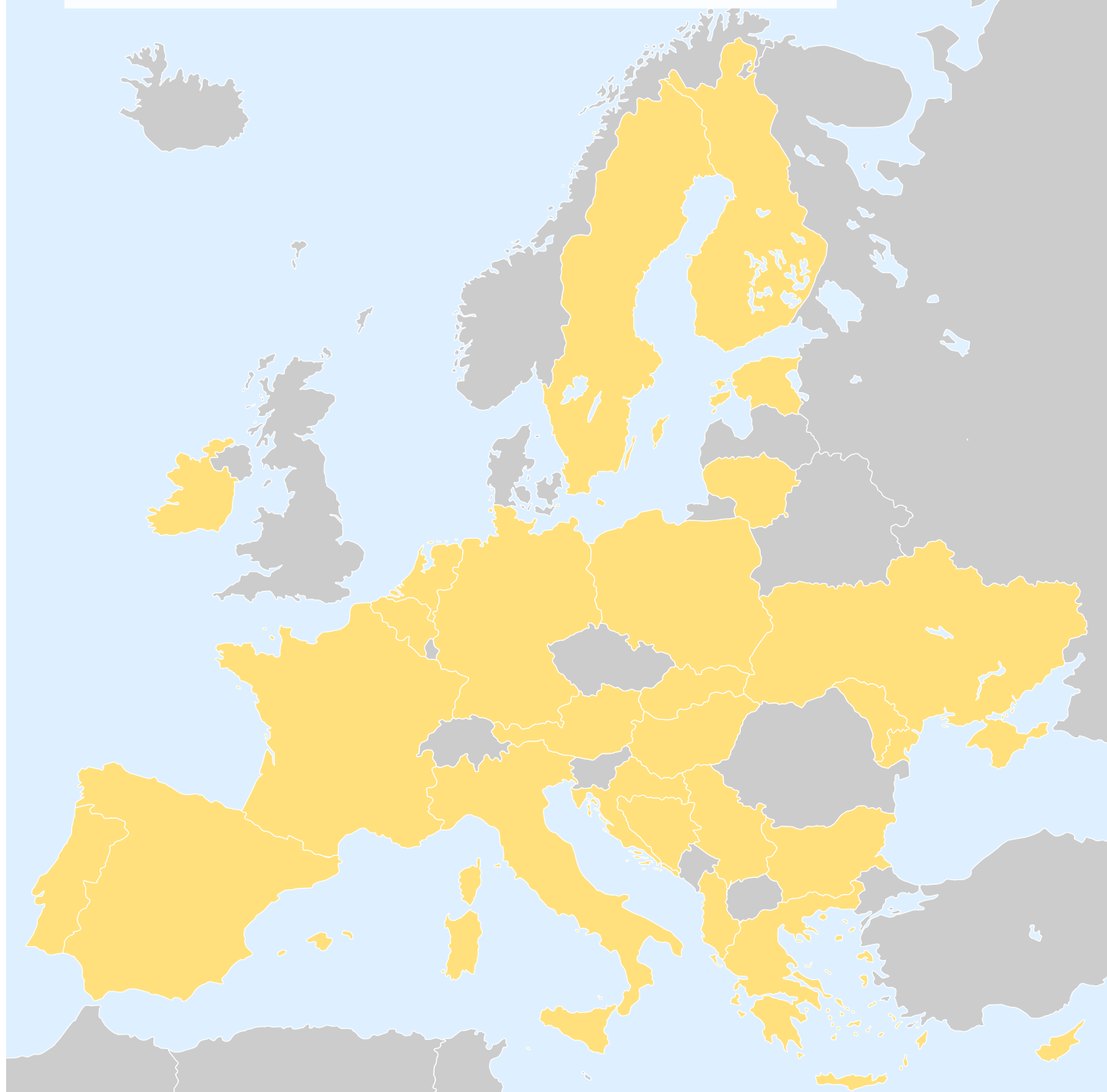


Becoming a Participation Professional

Capacity Building for Good Citizen Participation 2024–2025



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Becoming a Participation Professional

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Citizen Participation and Capacity Building

Citizen participation plays a vital role in strengthening inclusive democracy by enabling people to influence public policy beyond elections. Methods like participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies empower individuals to contribute to decisions on topics ranging from urban planning to constitutional reform.

These processes allow citizens, without formal mandates, to offer knowledge, preferences, and recommendations. Deliberative participation emphasises respectful dialogue, diverse perspectives, and informed decision-making.

As governments increasingly use participatory and deliberative methods to address complex issues, the need for high-quality processes is growing. Well-designed participation fosters trust and transparency, while poor implementation can lead to frustration and disengagement. To remain meaningful and effective, citizen participation must meet high standards and ensure citizens feel heard and valued.



The YEP Programme

The **Young Elected Politicians** (YEPs) are a network of local and regional politicians under 35 years from EU member states and accession countries, supported by the Committee of the Regions. The programme offers EU-level visibility, tailored training, and cross-border networking. It also helps participants understand EU institutions and raise local concerns at the European level.

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The Winter School – Training Young Politicians

In times of growing polarisation and democratic challenges, empowering young politicians is key. The Winter School brings together young leaders from across Europe to explore how citizen participation can strengthen democracy, enhance decision-making, and rebuild trust in politics.

Two different approaches – but one Winter School

2024 four online sessions and a three-day Winter School in presence in Brussels, 25 participants

2025 three-day Winter School in presence in Brussels, one high-level conference, 25 participants

All in all, a diverse group of 50 politicians from 24 countries out of the YEP network was selected from over 200 applicants, which came from 30 countries across Europe (24 EU-member states and six EU-enlargement countries) to take part in the 'Becoming a Citizen Participation Professional' programme. The programme taught the theory and practice of citizen participation with a focus on the regional and local level.

At the end of the Winter School, the participants were awarded a certificate as participation professionals. At least as important, however, is the momentum gained from the joint work and the deeper realisation that Europe means finding common solutions to common problems. After the Winter School, the participants not only continue to act as participation professionals in their municipalities and regions, but also as multipliers for citizen-centred politics in Europe.



The Winter School provided us with concrete tools that we can implement directly on the ground.

Diana Mardarovici, participant of the Winter School



Participation can be an amazing way to activate citizens and improve trust in government.

Bas van der Reest, participant of the Winter School

FIGURE 1 The 50 selected participants came from a total of 24 countries



Source: Own illustration

At a Glance



Capacity Building for Young Politicians: The Winter School of the Young Elected Politicians Programme is directed at Politicians up until the age of 35 from regions from all over Europe.



Initiators: The European Committee of the Regions and the Bertelsmann Stiftung.



50 participants from 24 countries at the YEP Winter School 2024 + 2025.



High demand: More than 200 applications were submitted for just 50 (25 in 2024 and 2025) available spots.



Strong and Growing Interest: The programme is becoming increasingly popular among young politicians from across Europe. Applications rose from 2024 to 2025 by 13%.



Diverse Group: The participants came from different parties, 24 different countries and had diverse backgrounds: President of the Municipal Assembly, Local Councilor, City Councilor, Regional Councilor, Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Vice Mayor, Deputy President of District Assembly.



Future: The European Committee of the Regions and the Bertelsmann Foundation are working together to address the growing interest among young politicians in the Winter School. To meet this increased demand, they are committed to both expand the range of offerings and establish it on a more permanent and sustainable basis.

The Winter School in Practice

The following objectives were pursued: To drive forward the participants' own participation projects, build methodological expertise through theoretical input and role-playing and consolidate the network by sharing the participants' experiences. In addition to trying out participation methods, the participants also developed their own projects for their municipality, city or region, which they want to implement together with citizens. From cross-party election appeals to information campaigns or specific infrastructure projects: Participants take their ideas and newly learnt methods straight home with them.

Many participation methods were not only introduced theoretically, but also implemented with the politicians – in networking situations among the politicians as well as in planning sessions for the participants' own projects, including the application of concrete methods, such as the World Café method.

Participants' Perspectives on the Winter School

The Winter School received consistently positive feedback from young politicians across Europe. **More than half of the participants rated the program as “very good,”** while the remaining participants rated it as “good.” Practical exercises for learning methods of citizen participation, thematic discussions, and insights into fellow participants' projects were especially highlighted.

Young political actors from 24 different countries took part. According to participants, the international exchange, the well-organized structure, and the in-person format of the Winter School played a key role in enabling active engagement with the program's goals. The interactive learning formats – particularly the hands-on elements – were perceived as especially effective.



Interactive activities help to understand better.

Participant of the Winter School



Major assets of the Winter School

- ✓ The in-person format of the Winter School
- ✓ The work in small groups
- ✓ The practical exercises for learning methods of citizen participation
- ✓ The insights into fellow participants' projects
- ✓ The international exchange

Furthermore, the value of collaborative work within smaller groups and the contribution of numerous experts was positively emphasised within the participants.

Participants valued not only the content provided, but also the opportunity to connect and exchange ideas with one another. What impressed them most was the strong link between theory and practice: Many of the young politicians are already involved in participation projects or have initiated their own project with support from the Winter School's expertise.

A deeper look into their perspectives reveals a strong need across European regions to deepen theoretical knowledge, strengthen practical skills, and actively promote citizen participation. The participants are working on a wide range of focus areas – from digital transformation, education, and climate change to social cohesion and the empowerment of young people.

The Winter School provides the ideal setting for this: a place for learning, exchange, and inspiration for a democratic future. After the Winter School, participants were given learning materials, practical handouts and blueprints. These will be available for them to access at any time.

Deep Dive: Examples from the Practical Projects

A central component of the project was that participants did not learn the necessary skills for good citizen participation in a vacuum, but rather in the context of their own citizen participation projects. This resulted in a wealth of practical projects throughout Europe.

Anton Dijev, City Councilor of Kohtla-Järve in Estonia (Renew Europe)



introduced a project where residents submitted ideas for local improvements, followed by a public vote. “Techniques [learned during] the Winter School, like mapping stakeholders and setting clear participation goals, were vital,” he underlined. According to Mr Dijev, the initiative strengthened trust in local governance because of the real-time voting and transparency of the process. However, the challenges remained in ensuring accessibility for older citizens which led to the introduction of physical voting stations. His advice? *“Start small to build trust and momentum. Transparency and outreach are key!”*

Benedek Farkas, Councilor of Budaörs in Hungary



and now CoR Alternate with the Renew Europe Group, credited the Winter School for helping him push through a long-advocated participatory budget in his town, which is set to launch in March 2025. Inspired by the programme, he is also organising a citizens’ assembly on parking policies. The training has not only inspired Mr Farkas to create citizen assemblies aiming to tackle key local issues.

Bas van der Reest, City Councilor of Middelburg in Netherlands (Renew Europe),



also spearheaded a citizen assembly in his city focused on redesigning New Year’s Eve celebrations. Traditionally, fireworks-related property damage, injuries and conflict with emergency services, have plagued the festivities, and the municipality is now engaging citizens to rethink how to celebrate safely. Additionally, he emphasised the importance of setting clear expectations in participatory processes: *“It’s essential to set clear expectations and secure commitment to the process. It’s better to disappoint participants before a project starts than to let them down afterward when their ideas aren’t implemented.”*

Looking Ahead:

Further Development of the Winter School – Driven by Community Feedback



More space for individual projects:

Participants see potential to make the agenda even more practice-oriented – for example, by allowing more time to work on their own projects. This would help them further develop and refine their ideas on site.



Better prepared, more effective:

Early access to materials – such as theoretical foundations – was highlighted as a helpful improvement to deepen engagement.



Clearer framework, stronger focus:

A structured theoretical introduction in advance would help participants better navigate the content and place practical elements in a broader context.

Transfer and continuation: A Glimpse into the Future

The YEP Winter School took place two times as a cooperation between the European Committee of the Regions and the Bertelsmann Foundation. It has become an integrated part of the YEP-workshop Programme with the opportunity to open it to other participants, even from other organisations. With this step, a pilot project of the New Democracy project from 2024 was successfully consolidated and transferred – training courses on citizen participation are now an integral part of the training of young politicians from all over Europe.

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