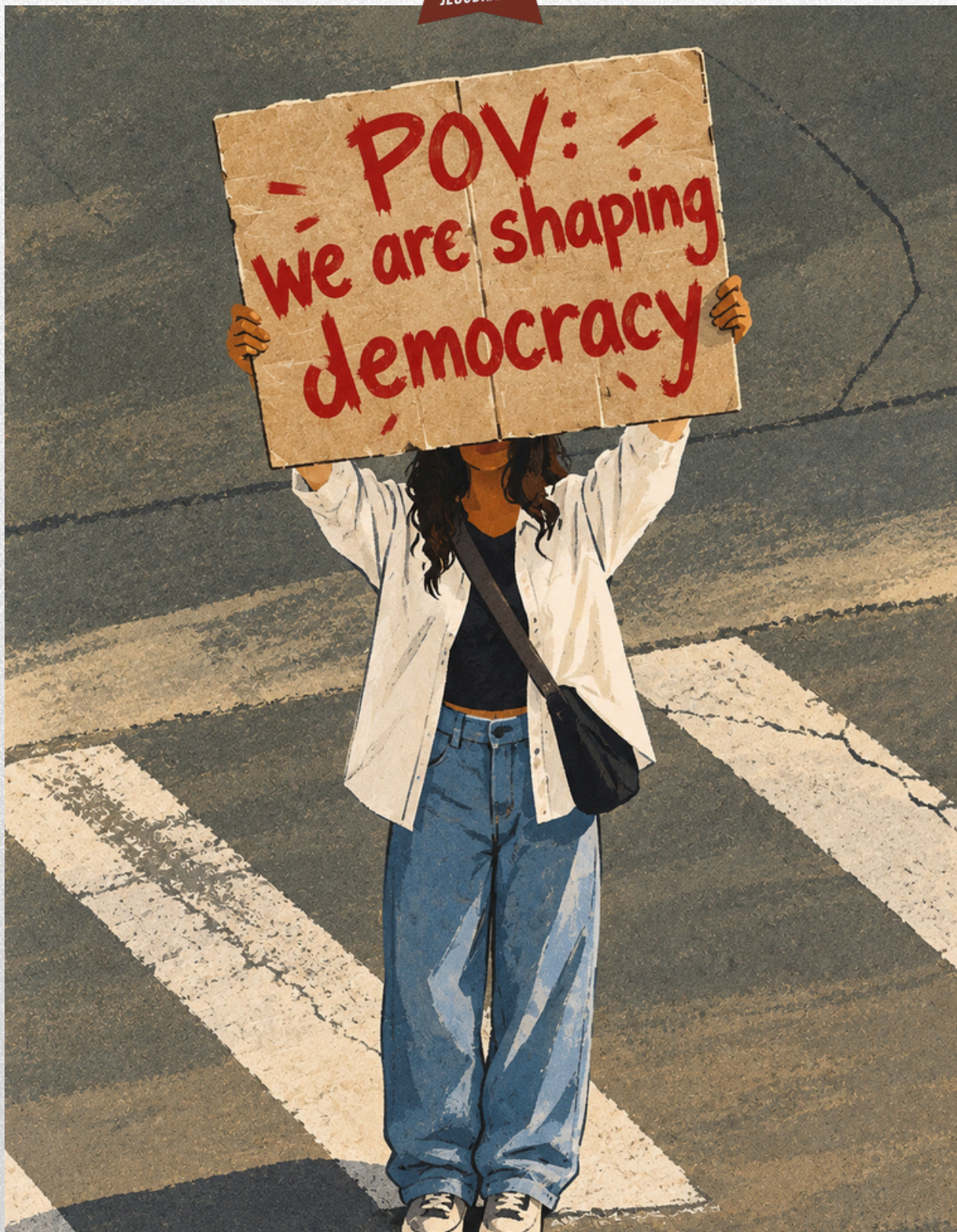


LORE SLEECKX



FEMKE DREEZEN



A YOUTH MANIFESTO FOR DEMOCRACY

REJUVENATING POLITICS
Making democracy younger
RAJEUNIR LA POLITIQUE
Redynamiser la démocratie



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INTRODUCTION

As the Flemish Youth Council, we remind policymakers that young people are active members of our society – whether they have the right to vote or not. Decisions in every area of life impact us. This also applies to the way our democratic society is governed and shaped. This motivated us to ask young people in Flanders aged 16 to 30 what democracy means to them, how they experience civic space, how they wish to participate in it, and their visions for the future. This manifesto brings together these diverse perspectives, translating them into a shared vision of democracy and providing policymakers with concrete recommendations at national and international levels.

Democracy is a way of living together. It is a system in which we consider the collective, listen to one another, acknowledge our differences, and work together to find common grounds. Freedom, equality, and diversity are inseparably linked to this. This vision is hopeful. At the same time, however, there is doubt. Democratic systems are under pressure worldwide. Peaceful protesters are being arrested, freedom of expression is under threat when it differs from the established discourse, and an increasing number of civil society organisations are losing their structural funding. The space for young people to express themselves, organise

and participate in decision-making, both on- and offline, cannot be taken for granted. Too often, our voices are dismissed as 'too idealistic' and is activism perceived negatively. It is as if being young means being taken less seriously.

As young people, we want to help shape today's democracies. This is precisely why we have written this manifesto. Our aim is to protect and strengthen our civic space — the spaces in which we participate, think critically, and organise ourselves — and, above all, to build the democracies we believe in.



WHAT DO WE AS FLEMISH YOUTH COUNCIL BELIEVE IN?

1) A DEMOCRACY THAT *INFORMS*

where young people have access to reliable and understandable information. Information that helps us understand why and how we can take action and participate. We want to experience a democracy in which we feel that our contribution matters, and that every action, no matter how big or small, can have an impact.

2) A DEMOCRACY THAT *INVOLVES*

one in which citizens not only have a voice but also feel that it matters. This should be the case not only when voting, but also when people are out on the streets, in public spaces, or when they are sitting around a table with friends, family, strangers, or policymakers. We want a democracy in which everyone can express themselves freely and safely, without fear of stigmatisation, exclusion, or negative reactions.

3) A DEMOCRACY THAT *CARES*

one in which intergenerational justice is central. The consequences of the choices being made today are already being felt: in the climate we grow up in, in the rising cost of living and housing, and in a world marked by war, conflict and growing geopolitical uncertainty. That is why we do not want to be invited to the table afterwards. We want to stand alongside others as equal partners from the start of the decision-making process that shapes our society. We want ownership of our future. And that starts today.



CALL TO ACTIONS

1. Inform young people about different forms of participation, both within formal education and through non-formal learning.

Invest in democratic education to provide young people with accurate, accessible and understandable information about their political rights and freedoms, as well as the various ways in which they can participate. Equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed choices and participate fully in democratic debates. Provide this education not only at school, but also during their free time and through youth organisations and initiatives.

2. Pay more attention to the ways in which young people participate informally, and recognise their voices, actions and initiatives as legitimate drivers of societal change.

Let young people's ideas, creative solutions and perspectives help shape policy initiatives and decisions. Young people offer valuable insights into today's society and the future. Provide a sustainable platform for their views and encourage them to suggest alternative approaches. Break through outdated ways of thinking and make room for critical and outspoken voices, even when they challenge established ideas. Experiment with alternative forms of democratic participation, such as citizen initiatives, online engagement, artistic expression and social mobilisation, with a particular focus on encouraging young people to participate in these activities.



CALL TO ACTIONS

3. Strengthen and protect civic space so young people and their organisations can organise freely, express themselves, and participate in public debate.

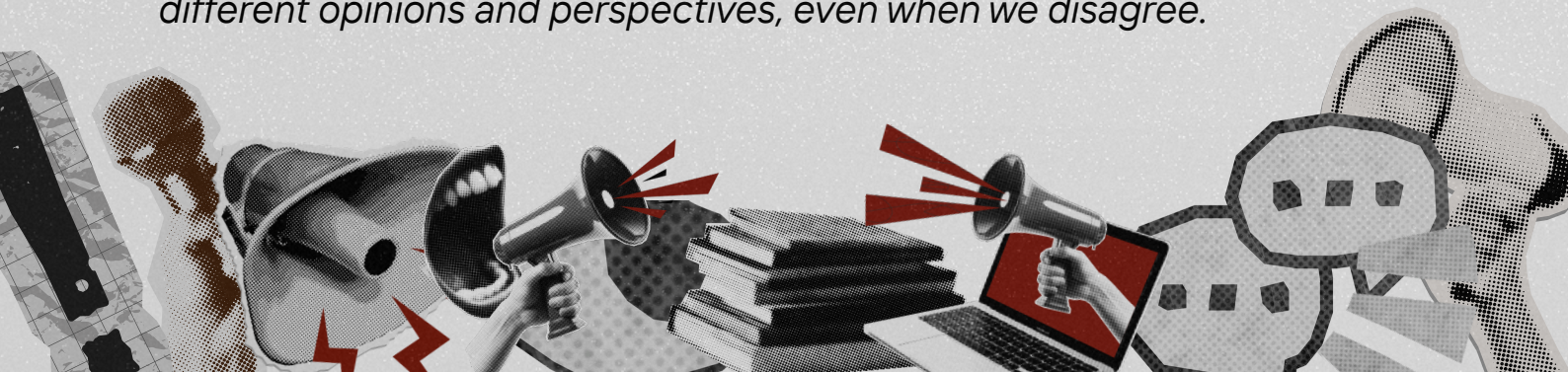
Young people have the right to speak out and be heard. This right is recognised under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight. Ensure that young people have a safe space in which they can express themselves without fear of stigmatisation or exclusion. Recognise the democratic sense of responsibility among young people, as well as the importance of solidarity.

Allow and support civil society to play an active role in supporting young people within this civic space. Provide sufficient resources and space to support young people and their organisations.

Recognise the role of youth organisations as full partners in the democratic process. Do not just consult them as formality. Be open to their advice and ideas, and give them the opportunity to help shape and adjust policies that affect them.

4. Strengthen social cohesion in our society by fostering tolerance and respect as the basis for dialogue and focusing on learning to deal with differences.

Young people want a world where people care for each other and for nature. A world where we are all free to be ourselves and where we treat each other with tolerance. We need to create public spaces where young and old can meet, develop their talents and interests, and engage in dialogue. Spaces where there is room to slow down, seek connection and listen to one another. This enables us to embrace different opinions and perspectives, even when we disagree.



CALL TO ACTIONS

5. Ensure that policies are future-proof and based on intergenerational solidarity.

Young people are calling for a world without weapons or climate change, and one that is fairer and more humane. The impact of political choices on people, our society and the environment must be considered in every decision. Look beyond today's needs and consider the needs of future generations. Give equal weight to climate, peace, well-being and social justice alongside economic objectives in policies and investments.

Involve young people and youth organisations in every stage of the policy process, from design to implementation and evaluation. This creates space for active involvement and ownership, recognises young people as equal partners in dialogue, and broadens the perspective on the impact of policy choices. Youth participation should therefore be an integral part of how policies are developed, not a standalone consultation.

Democracy is not a given. It is recreated every day by people who make their voices heard, listen to one another, and share responsibility for today's and tomorrow's society. This manifesto is therefore not a final statement, but an invitation to view democracy, civic space and participation in a new light and to reimagine them.



WRITTEN BY

**THE UN AND EU- YOUTH DELEGATES
OF THE FLEMISH YOUTH COUNCIL**

