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Article

European Leadership and European Youth in the Climate Change Regime Complex

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Abstract
Environmental degradation is one of the most significant challenges faced by humanity, yet current global politics struggle to implement collective solutions. Previous research has suggested that the EU has a leadership role in the international climate change regime complex, which refer to a set of overlapping institutions that address different aspects of climate governance. Moreover, within these regime complexes, non-state actors have been found to have an active role. Building on the literature on regime complexes and non-state actors, we study the specific role of European non-state actors in furthering the EU's agenda in the climate change regime complex. More precisely, we focus on European youth organizations. Indeed, youth have recently embraced the global climate agenda very actively while receiving limited attention from scholars. This article is based on the analysis of a database of youth organizations active in several institutions of the climate change regime complex, interviews with European officials and European youth actors, and documentary analysis. The analysis shows that EU interactions with European youth have been slow, while the need for coordination between the two is clear. On an analytical level, we contribute to the academic debate on how governmental entities such as the EU could shape international regime complexes with the support of non-state actors.

Keywords
climate change; climate change regime complex; EU leadership; international environmental negotiations; youth

Issue
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1. Introduction

The presence of youth on the international scene regarding environmental issues has significantly increased since 2018. Since Greta Thunberg, a young Swedish climate activist, became a prominent figure in global climate politics, thousands of young people have raised their voices at the international level to represent their generation's demands. Given the growing proportion of youth within the global population, their recent political visibility, their role as future policy actors, and their sensitivity to transgenerational justice, the young are now regarded as critical actors in global environmental politics. However, while current youth actions are receiving considerable attention, particularly from the mass media, we have little academic research on youth as actors in international relations.

European youth actors, defined by the EU as people between 15–29 years (Eurostat, n.d.), are especially active in the transnational youth climate movements (de Moor et al., 2020). The global Fridays for Future (FFF) movement started in Europe, and several major climate litigation cases were initiated by the European youth (Daly et al., 2021). According to the March 2019 Eurobarometer survey, young Europeans consider environmental protection the top priority (European Commission, 2019). Held after the rise of youth climate protests (including the FFF movement), the 2019 European Parliament election showed that young people are willing to change politics for a better future.

The turnout of young people under 25 in this election was at its most, driven by youth interest in climate issues (European Parliament, 2019). Such survey results indicate that youth climate movements have a discursive influence on young Europeans that cannot be neglected in politics.

The active engagement of European youth in global climate politics coincides with the EU's efforts to become a leader in the climate change international regime complex (Earsom & Delreux, 2021; Oberthür & Kelly, 2008). This regime complex, following the definition given in this thematic issue's editorial (Delreux & Earsom, 2023), comprises a set of overlapping institutions (which we refer to as fora) that address different aspects of the climate change issue. The EU has proactively navigated this complex over the past decades. European youth's recent involvement in the climate movement resonates with the EU's engagement in the regime complex.

This article precisely questions to which extent the EU and European youth climate activism, both being noticeable in international climate politics, interact: How have European youth actors been engaged in the complex? What have the EU and its member states done concerning youth participation in the climate change regime complex? How similar or different are the EU and European youth actors' discourses on these politics within the complex? What does it tell us regarding the role of the EU in the climate change regime complex? Generally, this article contributes to the academic debate regarding how governmental entities shape international regime complexes through non-state actors' support.

The next section presents a review of the literature on youth in global environmental politics and the importance of the EU in international regime complexes, explaining how combining both brings important insights into global governance processes and the role of the EU in these processes. Section 3 presents the methods used to research the EU and European youth involvement in the climate change regime complex and justifies the case study.

Sections 4 and 5 present the results: (a) the state of youth participation in the negotiation meetings of several institutions of the climate change regime complex, with a special focus on European youth, (b) the interactions of EU policy regarding youth participation in international climate politics on financial and organizational dimensions, and (c) a comparison of the claims made by European youth organizations and the EU on recent climate politics for discursive interactions. Finally, elements for discussion are developed in the conclusion.

2. Youth Actors and Regime Complexes: A Literature Review

2.1. Youth Actors in Global Environmental Governance

Recent youth actions have encouraged preliminary academic studies on youth as participants in global environmental politics, especially on climate change. From this, three groups of studies can be identified.

The first group analyzes youth climate protests, especially the FFF movement, with detailed analyses of youth claims (Knops, 2021). Terren and Soler-i-Martí (2021) analyze the social network and discourse of FFF-Barcelona presented on their Twitter account. O'Brien et al. (2018) suggest a typology of youth activism as dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent actions, demonstrating the diverse ways youth use to target climate policy from the outside. Finally, some scholars concentrate on the social characteristics of climate marchers, showing that many are newcomers to the climate movement. This is especially true for young people (de Moor et al., 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019). While these studies are important, they only cover the informal politics of youth involvement and neglect their presence within formal international negotiations. Some recent studies cover activism parallel to climate COPs but concentrate on the broader climate movement rather than youth movements (de Moor, 2018, 2020).

The second group explores youth participation in climate trials (Kerns, 2021; Parker et al., 2022). Despite the strong mediatization of judicial actions, these publications identify "a worrisome trend in which youth-focused cases are dismissed due to a lack of justiciability or standing at a procedural stage" (Parker et al., 2022, p. 64). These studies confirm that youth are still neglected as a real actor in climate politics. They also show that scientific research focuses on youth as actors contesting global climate politics rather than acting within it.

The third group focuses more specifically on formal youth participation in international negotiations and therefore resonates more closely with the objectives of this study. Yunita et al. (2018) question youth participation in forest negotiations. Based on a survey, they identify the extent to which youth are invited to express their views during negotiations, finding that such opportunities are limited. In the same line, Soo Ah Kwon (2019, p. 937) demonstrates how international youth summits have been summits "on youth" rather than "by youth." A few studies also investigate youth as participants in international climate conferences, especially at UNFCCC COPs (Thew, 2018; Thew et al., 2020, 2021; Yona et al., 2020), sometimes with a specific focus on indigenous youth (MacKay et al., 2020; Ritchie, 2021). These studies represent a knowledgeable first step toward questioning the political influence of youth in formal processes. They are, however, primarily based on a qualitative account of one specific COP, missing the broader and evolutive picture of youth involvement. Moreover, they mostly focus on official youth platforms, such as YOUNGO (the official UNFCCC youth constituency), failing to picture the broad diversity of the formats of youth actors in international climate politics.

Overall, the literature confirms the rising political role of youth actors, especially in climate politics, through activism, trials, and formal involvement in

international negotiations. It also confirms the existence of research gaps. While youth have recently become very vocal, few studies give a comprehensive picture of their political role within official international processes. The strategic role of non-state actors and their potential alliances with governmental actors also need to be explored. The literature on regime complexes and its insights on non-state actors can provide elements to concretize such systematic investigation.

2.2. Regime Complexes and Non-State Actors

The regime complexes literature (see also Delreux & Earsom, 2023) has not yet engaged with youth actors, although it has analyzed non-state actors in general. Despite the multiplicity of intergovernmental institutions, intergovernmental politics has proven to hardly cover the scope of the issues dealt with by regime complexes (Krisch, 2017). This has led to the recognition of the importance of "polycentricity" (Jordan et al., 2018) as a new governance paradigm whereby all actors from civil society, and not just governmental ones, at all levels, can participate in governance efforts by promoting awareness and action at all scales. The literature on non-state actors within regime complexes has concentrated chiefly on two important research questions: the negotiation burden of regime complexes for non-state actors and the effects of regime complexes on power dynamics between inter-state and transnational politics.

On the first aspect, international negotiators have had to pay a "negotiation burden" (Muñoz et al., 2009) to participate in the negotiations of single international institutions. It is common for the negotiations of global agreements to take several years, require dozens of official meetings and informal preparation sessions, get subdivided into working groups, and necessitate large negotiation delegations. In addition to quantitative burdens, actors need high levels of expertise to follow the content of the negotiations (Campbell et al., 2014). For weaker actors, strategies for effective involvement in single negotiations have been proposed (Chasek & Rajamani, 2001). Issues of participation, representation, and political influence are likely to become more severe in the context of regime complexes, especially for non-state actors, who often have fewer resources on the international scene. In addition to situations in single regimes, key coordination skills are required for states to manage the fragmentation of international institutions (Morin & Orsini, 2014; Scott, 2011). Evidence from the forest regime complex (Orsini, 2017) confirms the existence of a negotiation burden for the non-state actors' presence in regime complexes. Research is needed to evaluate the extent to which intergovernmental and non-state actors can pay such a negotiation burden.

On the second aspect, the effects of regime complexes on power dynamics within global governance are debated. On the one hand, studies of state politics in a context of regime complexity found that the most powerful states were able to choose the direction of the negotiations while the weaker were left aside (Alter & Meunier, 2009). This tends to indicate that regime complexes "operate(s) to sabotage the evolution of a more democratic and egalitarian international regulatory system" and, in the end, yield "a regulatory order that reflects the interests of the powerful that they alone can alter" (Benvenisti & Downs, 2007, pp. 595–596, as cited in Faude & Groβe-Kreul, 2020, p. 433). On the other hand, fragmentation can lead to unexpected outcomes and regime complexes increase the windows of opportunity, even for usually weak actors that use regime complexes as discursive areas: "they (regime complexes) enable actors marginalized within the international institution producing negative spillovers to demand inter-institutional justifications…in doing so, they enable normative progress in global governance" (Faude & Groβe-Kreul, 2020, p. 433). Kuyper (2014, as cited in Faude & Groβe-Kreul, 2020, p. 433) argues that the democratization of global governance should occur at the level of regime complexes because they empower weaker actors and enhance the realization of the three core values of democratization: "equal participation," "accountability," and "institutional revisability.''

Along with this debate about power dynamics within regime complexes, research has shown how non-state actors, just as states, can reverse the usual power dynamics within regime complexes by practicing forum shopping, forum shifting, or forum linking (Orsini, 2013). Certain non-state actors, such as environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs), are particularly skillful in international regime complexes to the detriment of business groups that are traditionally more skilled at targeting individual international institutions (Orsini, 2017).

What is still to be researched is the potential synergies between governmental and non-state actors within regime complexes. Because the negotiation burden is high for all actors, creating synergy between their participation and claims could be an interesting strategy. One could expect governmental actors to surf on the lobbying wave created by non-state actors with similar objectives and vice-versa. This article engages in this discussion on participation and power to investigate the role of inter-governmental and non-state actors and their interactions within regime complexes, a topic so far neglected in the academic literature. More precisely, we focus on the EU and European youth within the climate change regime complex as both push for more ambition in global climate change politics. Our case is, therefore, a most-likely case (Johnson et al., 2019). We detail our methodology in the next section.

3. Researching European Youth Participation in the Climate Change Regime Complex

This article relies on four methodological decisions. First, we decided on the climate change regime complex as

a case study. Climate change is one of our most central environmental problems, in which the EU and many young people are actively involved. Keohane and Victor (2011) and, more recently, Earsom and Delreux (2021) provide a complete cartography of such a regime complex comprising more than 30 institutions. For this study, as we are interested in youth as actors in international relations, we zoomed in on the institutions that provide youth actors an official constituency status. As a result, we selected three institutions that are part of the climate change regime complex: the UNFCCC, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the Commission for Sustainable Development/High-Level Political Forum (CSD/HLPF). Youth actors have been recognized as an official major group within these three fora of the climate change regime complex. These institutions were all created at the 1992 Earth Summit, where youth was recognized as a constituency in global environmental politics. It is important to recognize that these institutions exist alongside others that also engage with young people—several other fora of the complex invite youth actors, such as Youth20 summits in the G20 fora or Youth7 summits in the G7 fora. However, these invitations come in parallel to official meetings and youth are not directly integrated into the policy-making process within these institutions. Additionally, the three institutions included in this study (hereafter also referred to as Rio fora) were created simultaneously, and all deal with environmental issues. This means that they represent a coherent sub-set of institutions of the regime complex.

Second, we anchored our research on a systematic quantitative assessment of youth presence in these processes, building a database. We, therefore, compiled an inventory of youth participation in the CBD, UNFCCC COPs, and in CSD/HLPF processes from 1995 to 2021. The inventory was built in two steps: gathering relevant documentation and searching for youth actors within such documentation. We used a top-down searching method for the first step. The UNFCCC and CBD secretariats publish the lists of participants in their COPs. Participant lists are not always available for CSD/HLPF meetings, meaning that data for this platform is less robust. In addition, we included the lists of officially registered participants available through official reports and meeting programs. To complement this top-down method, we developed a bottom-up searching method by looking at non-official sources on the negotiations, such as the Earth Negotiations Bulletins published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development. For the second step of the inventory, keywords were used for data mining in the collected documents to trace youth actors' presence. These included any expression containing terms like "youth," "young," "child," "*jeune*," "*joven*," "student," "*estudiant*," "*étudiant*," "scout," "girl," "boy," and "kid" as the documents gathered were available in English, French, and Spanish. We collected the names of organizations and individuals that refer to themselves with these keywords. While covering a broad range of youth actors, this keyword list is non-exhaustive. Moreover, youth organizations do not necessarily have these keywords in their name. To capture additional actors, we collected the lists of organizations admitted by the UNFCCC under the youth category, YOUNGO members, and accredited organizations to the Major Group for Children and Youth at the UN Environment Programme (UNEP MGCY). We then determined whether these organizations or members had attended the meetings of the Rio fora. To concentrate our study on youth as actors in international politics, we eliminated students from schools and universities based in the cities where the meetings were taking place to exclude young people present for observation and learning purposes only.

Third, we coded the types of youth actors involved in the Rio fora meetings. We distinguished youth representatives registered as NGOs, national youth delegates, UN and other intergovernmental organizations, and non-specified. To refine our understanding of NGOs, we coded them into five types: youth-led NGOs, youth-serving NGOs, ENGOs, business groups, and others. While there is no universally agreed definition of youth-led organizations, the UNEP MGCY (2021) defines them as those with a policy-making body controlled by people 30 years old or under. On the contrary, youth-serving organizations work with children and/or youth but are not led by them. We used this distinction between youth-led and youth-serving organizations as we were particularly interested in the specificity of young people as political actors. However, as it was not always easy to know the board members' age, we mobilized a more general definition of youth-led organizations, similar to the one used by the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition: "organization(s)…predominantly governed and staffed by young people" (Youth Action, 2012, p. 1).

Fourth, in addition to the database, we conducted qualitative observations and semi-structured interviews with some EU officials and European youth actors identified in our database. For observations, we registered and virtually attended the seventh and the eighth HLPF meetings (6–15 July 2021; 5–15 July 2022) and the UNFCCC COP26 (31 October–11 November 2021). In addition, we conducted 15 interviews (see Supplementary File; we refer to interviewees anonymously by allocating a random number to the different interviews). We also analyzed official documents published by the European Commission, the European Parliament, and Eurostat on young people in international climate politics.

All these methods enabled us to trace the presence and diversity of European actors representing or engaging with youth within the three fora of the climate change regime complex. Such tracing allows us to discuss potential negotiation burden-sharing and lobbying interactions between the EU and non-state youth actors. The following sections present the results of our research.

4. Quantitative Assessment of European Youth in the Climate Change Regime Complex

Although varied in numbers, youth actors have attended the Rio fora since their initial phase. In the UNFCCC COPs, we found 8,906 youth attendances from COP1 to COP26 (7,492 NGO representatives, 814 national youth delegates, 483 UN and other intergovernmental organization youth representatives, and 117 non-specified participants; see Figure 1). Meanwhile, 941 youth attendances were found from CBD COP1 to COP14 (911 NGO representatives and 30 national youth delegates; see Figure 2). Lastly, 183 youth attendances were found from the first CSD meeting to the seventh HLPF meeting (122 NGO representatives, 32 national delegates, six UN and other intergovernmental organization representatives, and 10 non-specified; see Figure 3).

Those graphs confirm the general tendency of increasing youth involvement in the climate change regime complex. We now zoom in on European youth actors engaging in the UNFCCC COPs, the core institution of the climate change regime complex, looking at NGOs (Section 4.1) and national delegates (Section 4.2).

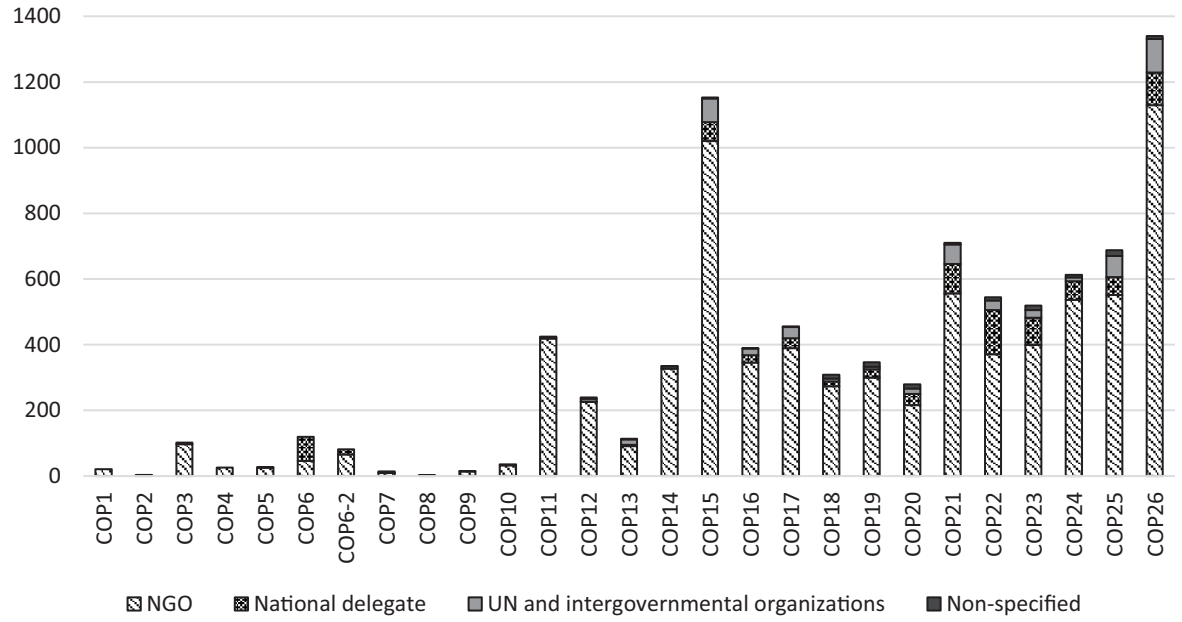

Figure 1. Youth attendance formats at UNFCCC COPs.

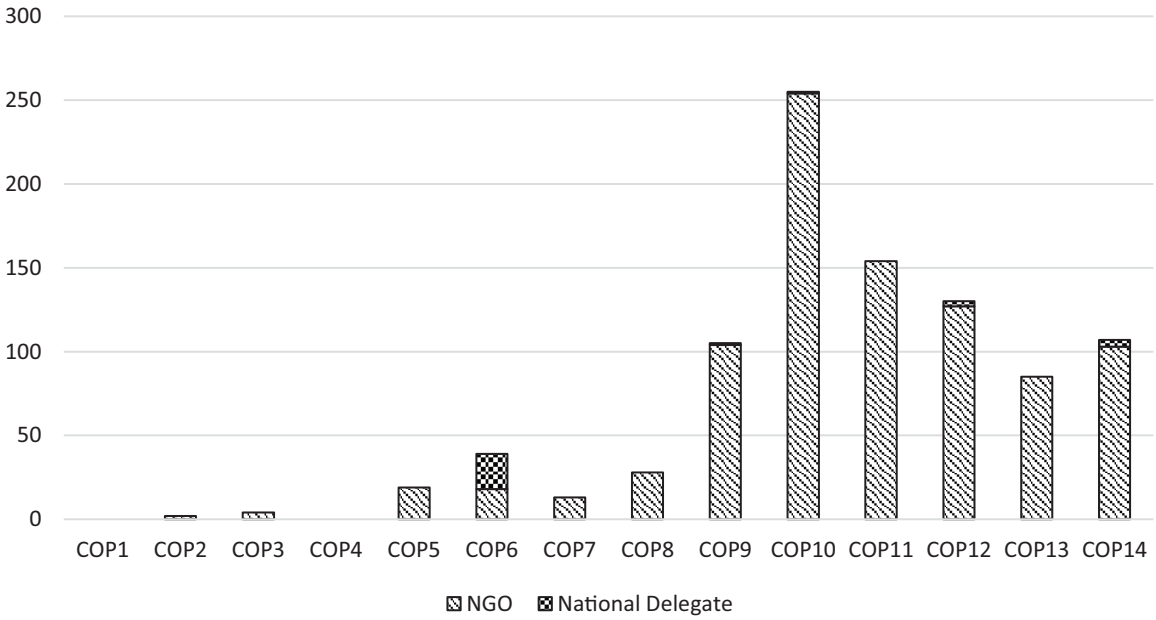

Figure 2. Youth attendance formats at CBD COPs.

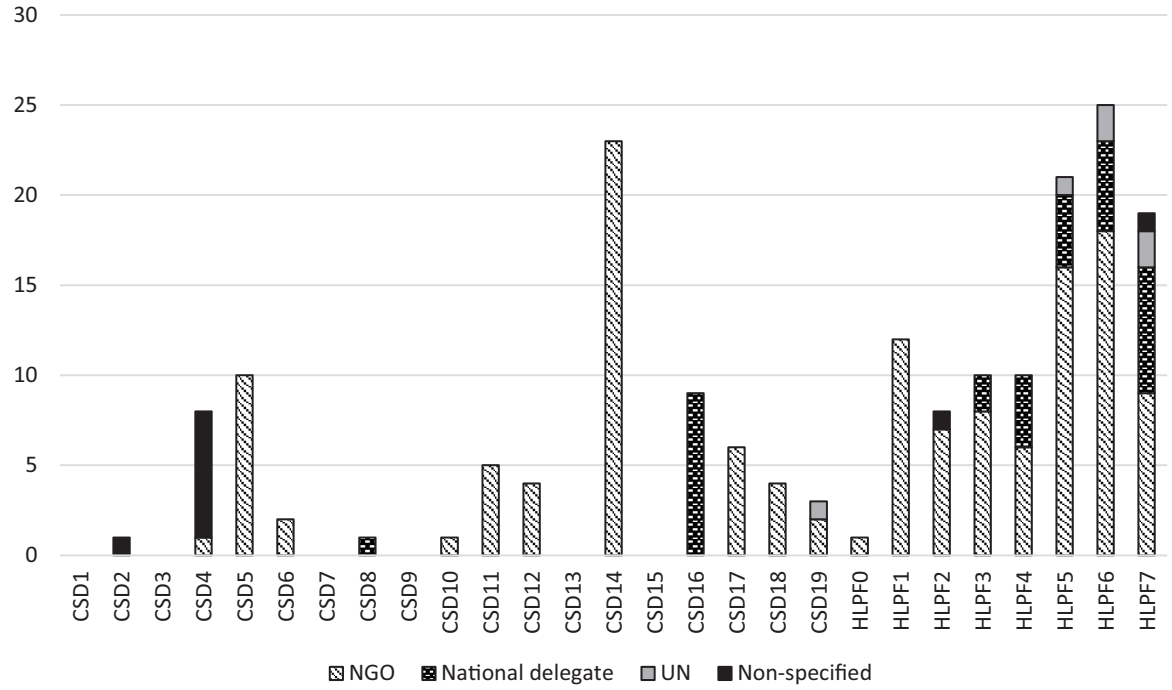

Figure 3. Youth attendance formats at CSD/HLPF meetings.

4.1. European Youth Organizations Within the Complex

We searched for European NGOs (excluding organizations from individual member states) that had attended the UNFCCC COPs more than twice, with the assumption that they have a minimum political involvement in climate politics. We chose the UNFCCC as a benchmark for youth involvement in climate politics because it is recognized as the core institution of the regime complex. Out of 591 NGOs, 13 organizations were identified (Table 1).

Six of those organizations are youth-led, four are ENGOs, two are business groups, and one is a youth-serving organization, confirming the diverse and dynamic nature of youth political representation at the European level. Two have participated as sub-organizations registered with a badge from a host organization. Meanwhile, several organizations hosted other youth groups. For example, Climate Action Network Europe had participants from national or local youth NGOs such as Swiss Youth for Climate, Bundjugend, and Estonian Youth Nature Protection Association. In addition, most youth participants from the European Nuclear Society and the European Atomic Forum were affiliated with the Young Generation Network, a network of young nuclear professionals worldwide (European Nuclear Society—Young Generation Network, 2022).

Regarding the Rio fora, our database enables us to identify only one European youth organization active in the UNFCCC and the CSD/HLPF simultaneously and no European youth organization active in the three fora at the same time. For the CSD/HLPF, the European Youth Forum is the only European youth organization that has attended more than two CSD/HLPF meetings and has also been active in the UNFCCC fora. The absence of European youth organizations from the UNFCCC in the CBD is explained by the lowest presence of youth actors in the CBD negotiations and by the fact that they tend to register under the common umbrella of one unique youth platform, the Global Youth Biodiversity Network.

Overall, our data indicate that only one European youth organization, the European Youth Forum, can monitor two of the three Rio fora of the climate change regime complex. This fact confirms that the negotiation burden is very high for youth organizations within the regime complex.

4.2. European National Youth Delegates

Using the UNFCCC as a starting point and the focal organization of the complex, we identified the parties that sent youth delegates to climate COPs. Among the 119 parties that sent youth delegates to climate COPs, 81 sent them to more than two meetings, and 15 of them are EU member states (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, France, Hungary, Latvia, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland, Germany, and Luxembourg; see Table 2).

While youth delegates' attendance at COPs has been fragmented in most countries, their attendance frequency has increased over time. However, Table 2 also shows that most European countries have not institutionalized the youth delegate program. Moreover, there were no youth delegates at the EU level until the one-year pilot program launched by the EU delegation to the UN in September 2022 (interview 13). Youth delegates have been mostly hosted by the individual member states (interview 2).

Table 1. European youth organizations that attended UNFCCC COPs more than two times.

Organization Name	Type	No. of attended COPs	Total number of delegates	Attended COPs
European Youth Forum	Youth-led	11	102	COP14–17, 19, 21–26
Federation of Young European Greens	Youth-led	10	81	COP14–17, 19, 21, 23–26
Climate Action Network Europe	ENGO	9	34	COP1–3, 5–6, 19, 24–26
European Nuclear Society	Business Group	6	15	COP14, 21–24, 26
Young Friends of the Earth Europe*	Youth-led	6	60	COP14–15, 20–21, 25–26
Young European Leadership	Youth-led	4	23	COP21–24
Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe**	Youth-led	3	4	COP24–26
Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisations	Youth-serving	3	5	COP21, 24–25
European Youth Forest Action	Youth-led	3	22	COP1, 5, 15
European Climate Foundation	ENGO	2	3	COP18, 20
European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability	ENGO	2	5	COP24–25
European Atomic Forum	Business Group	2	4	COP23, 26
Women in Europe for a Common Future	ENGO	2	2	COP14, 21

Notes: Young Friends of the Earth Europe and Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe are organizations that participated as sub-organizations of other registered organizations; * for Young Friends of the Earth Europe, the main host organization was Friends of the Earth International; ** for the Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe, the main host organization was Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance.

Regarding the other Rio fora, the databases show that Belgium is the only government to have included youth delegates more than twice within its delegation to CBD COPs (and interviews confirmed Belgian youth delegates' presence in the complex). Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden are the only delegations to have included youth delegates for more than two CSD/HLPF meetings. The youth delegates from those four countries presented a joint statement at CSD16, urging other countries to include youth delegates in

Table 2. UNFCCC parties that sent youth delegates more than two times to the COPs.

Party	Number of COPs	Number of youth delegates sent	Attended COPs
Finland	10	10	COP3, 6, 17, 19–24, 26
Denmark	9	20	COP6–7, 20, 22, 24–26
Austria	8	18	COP19–26
Belgium	8	14	COP6, 9, 13, 16–17, 19–21
Sweden	8	13	COP3, 15, 21–26
Netherlands	6	7	COP3, 19–20, 23–25
France	3	5	COP21–22, 25
Hungary	3	5	COP6, 25–26
Latvia	3	5	COP15, 25–26
Czech Republic	3	4	COP6, 6–2, 26
Slovenia	3	4	COP6, 15, 24
Poland	2	3	COP6, 24
Germany	2	3	COP6, 6–2
Luxembourg	2	2	COP6, 24

their delegations to the sustainable development negotiations (Walter et al., 2008).

Data from the UNFCCC confirms that European delegations are more likely than others to nominate youth delegates. It also shows that Belgian, Dutch, and Swedish youth delegates are more likely to have effects on the climate change regime complex as a whole and not just on the UNFCCC. However, again, our data shows the poor recognition of youth as official European-level actors.

Our quantitative assessment enables us to answer our first research question: How have European youth actors been engaged in the climate change regime complex? The assessment shows that although youth actors' formal participation in the complex has occurred in various representation formats (NGOs, youth delegates, etc.), it has been limited across the regime complex. However, quantitative data does not explain the reasons for the poor involvement of European youth and the potential existing interactions between European youth and European officials. We now turn to a qualitative assessment to cover other research questions: What have the EU and its member states done concerning youth participation in the climate change regime complex? How similar or different are the EU and European youth actors' discourses on these politics within the complex?

5. Interactions Between the EU and European Youth Within the Climate Change Regime Complex

In this section, we discuss the interactions between the EU and European youth on material, organizational, and discursive aspects within the climate change regime complex. The objective is to understand to which extent the EU has collaborated with youth actors and to which extent synergies are visible between both.

5.1. Material Interactions

To investigate their funding relations, we searched the profiles of the identified European youth organizations on the EU Transparency Register website (European Commission, 2022a). As presented in Table 3, nine of the 13 identified organizations are in this Register, meaning they are officially recognized as European interest groups.

Almost half of the identified European youth organizations have received EU grants over 2020–2021. However, except for the European Youth Forum, they are not highly dependent on them. Interestingly, youth-led organizations' dependence on EU grants is generally higher than other organizations. One explanation could be that youth-led organizations are run on smaller budgets than conventional ENGOs or business groups. As explained by one EU official, "these other stakeholders have the resources and the knowledge connections to participate more actively in the policy-making process in a way that youth simply cannot" (interview 7). Dependence on funding opportunities is also visible for national youth delegates. According to our interviewees, in Belgium, the number and capacities of youth delegates usually depend on the funding situation, the capacity, and willingness of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in organizing youth delegations, and the negotiated mandates for youth delegates (interviews 1, 3, and 8).

Lack of funding was a recurrent theme in interviews, with young people being highly active despite their involvement being voluntary. Moreover, current EU funding comes with constraints, since the application is time-consuming, EU bureaucracy is inflexible, and funding applications do not feel like a proper collaboration. Lack of funding explains the concentration of youth presence in the UNFCCC fora. For example, the European

Table 3. The funding sources of European youth organizations involved in global climate politics.

Organization	Total budget or estimated annual costs (2020) in euros	EU grants (2020) in euros	EU grants/budget rate (2020)
European Youth Forum	2,736,999	2,074,369	75.79%
Federation of Young European Greens	235,072	74,373	31.64%
Climate Action Network Europe	4,467,674 (2021)	530,131 (2021)	11.86% (2021)
European Nuclear Society	50,000–99,999	24,469	24.47–48.94%
Young European Leadership	6,307 (2021)	3,465 (2021)	54.94% (2021)
European Climate Foundation	126,340,369	N/A	N/A
European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability	100,000–199,999	32,500	16.25–32.5%
European Atomic Forum	300,000–399,999	38,255	9.56–12.75%
Women in Europe for a Common Future	1,232,294	N/A	N/A

chapter of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network has individual members who participated in the UNFCCC meetings under other capacities, but it is financially impossible to follow UNFCCC meetings along with CBD meetings consistently. In addition to finance, organizational resources are lacking.

5.2. Organizational Interactions

As youth raised their voice in climate politics, the EU launched initiatives to increase European youth representation. A European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) opinion adopted in 2020 indicated the need to institutionalize youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU and include youth in EU delegations to international negotiations, including the UNFCCC conferences (European Economic and Social Committee, 2020). Subsequently, the EESC started to include one youth delegate in their delegation at COP26. The EU also appointed two youth delegates through a pilot project in 2022 to engage them in UN conferences such as the General Assembly, UNFCCC, and CBD COPs. Moreover, the EU began to support more youth actions in the UNFCCC COPs by hosting several youth-focused side events in the EU Pavilion program (European Commission, 2022b; European Union, 2021a). While the EU's organizational support for youth participation is growing, youth delegates' activities are often limited to subsidiary roles such as observers, learners, or communicators without negotiation mandates. Some interviewees expressed that the COP26 negotiation "exacerbated the feeling that those with observer status could serve very little" (interviews 3 and 4).

Overall, the EU's actions to include youth in climate policy are more visible in its internal policy process. After Greta Thunberg spoke in the European Parliament in 2019, the European Commission initiated several youth events attended by EU leaders (Tenti, 2019). FFF activists met with the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen three times between 2018–2022 to discuss climate issues (Jack, 2022). The EESC hosted Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables twice in 2021 in cooperation with the European Youth Forum and Generation Climate Europe (a youth-led organization). Regular dialogues with young people have also been organized since 2020 as part of the European Climate Pact (Gorman, 2021), 2022 was labelled the European Year of Youth, and 305 European Climate Pact Youth Ambassadors were nominated. Even at COP26, the EU promoted its efforts to foster youth participation in its internal climate policy (rather than external) through the side event "Youth and Climate Action: European Climate Pact & Youth Sounding Board" (European Union, 2021b).

Assessments were mixed regarding the inclusion of youth delegates within national delegations. National youth delegates usually participate in COPs with party status that increases their participation opportunities. However, youth delegates are generally excluded from closed negotiations (interviews 10 and 12). Interviewees who had participated in the Belgian youth delegate program pointed out that the youth delegates from EU member states are often well organized, and youth voices are heard in a participatory manner at the EU level (interview 2). However, here as well, the effects of youth participation are more visible at the internal rather than external level. As explained by one former Belgian youth delegate: "In the end, we have more impact on internal policies than on international policies" (interview 1).

Finally, collaboration is not always meaningful (Federation of Young European Greens, 2021; interview 5). The EU is blamed for failing to engage with what already exists, especially with established youth organizations. It seems to cherry-pick youth individuals and include them randomly. Moreover, communication tends to be biased in one direction from the EU to youth actors, as explained by one interviewee:

> We had the first roundtable with the Timmermans cabinet..., and initially, they (the EU officers) were thinking "this is a good chance for us to come and tell the youth what we're doing." And I said "no, the point of this is letting the youth delegates tell you what they want." (interview 6).

EU initiatives are seen as positive, but with improvement potential: "it is quite better than other places, but it still not as good as it could be" (interview 14). This mixed evaluation of the organizational interaction's potential is also visible in discursive interactions.

5.3. Discursive Interactions

The EU's evaluation of COP26 was positive. The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (European Commission, 2021) referred to COP26 as "a step in the right direction" because 1.5°C remained within reach. On the contrary, European youth-led organizations were skeptical about the process. As explained by one interviewee: "we are usually seen on the more radical side of environmental organizations. In a way, we are not specialized in advocacy...It's more about creating a new narrative and calling for radical systemic change. It's also related to what we believe in" (interview 3; see also interview 7).

In their statement released for COP26, Young Friends of the Earth Europe called for 12 actions for state negotiators, including no more fossil fuels and false climate solutions, fundamental human rights; and transparent decision-making (Young Friends of the Earth Europe, 2021a). The Federation of Young European Greens asked negotiators for innovative solutions which would redistribute wealth to the global South and repair the loss and damage occurring in the global South (Federation of Young European Greens, 2021). The European Youth Forum demanded more ambitious climate targets from the EU and argued for young people, particularly from

that area, to be included in decision-making processes (European Youth Forum, 2021).

After COP26, all three organizations expressed disappointment. The Federation of Young European Greens regretted that "the Loss and Damage Fund has been stripped down to a 'workshop' by huge pressure of the EU, UK, and US" (Federation of Young European Greens, 2021). Young Friends of the Earth Europe mentioned that the agreement "does not keep 1.5°C alive as the rich countries do not commit to equity, fair share, and historical responsibilities" (Young Friends of the Earth Europe, 2021b). The European Youth Forum regretted that "the commitments made by governments at COP26 are simply not ambitious enough" (European Youth Forum, 2021). However, these comments were general, and not precisely linked to actions by the EU.

The difference in discourses between the EU and European youth organizations is not surprising. A gradual increase in discursive interactions between the two is observed, but it is still at the early stage. As explained by one EU official: "for now, I would say it's working in practice, rather than as a systemic change. But it is the beginning of a systemic change" (interview 11).

6. Conclusion

This article examined how the EU and European youth actors interact with each other within the climate change regime complex. The results show that EU interactions with youth are slow, although recent advancements in such efforts can be seen. The high awareness of climate change among European youth and their sensitivity to fairness and equity could be a solid political capital for the EU to promote ambitious climate policy in the regime complex. For example, in 2022, EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs agreed to emphasize the interrelationship between climate change and the realization of human rights in climate diplomacy (European Union External Action, 2022). Such policy direction aligns with European youth organizations' emphasis on human rights and climate justice. Nevertheless, the need for coordination between the EU and European youth actors is clear. For the literature on non-state actors in regime complexes, our study demonstrates participation and power dynamics within the climate change regime complex. Looking at our finding also help us answer our final question: What does the research tell us regarding the role of the EU in the climate change regime complex?

On participation, several European youth organizations have been able to pay the negotiation burden to participate in specific institutions of the complex over time. However, nearly all of them lack the resources to follow the different institutions of the complex simultaneously. Positive developments have been seen in the few youth organizations able to follow different institutions by attending as organizations or having members participate under different statuses. However, the EU still needs to be bold in supporting their participation. Some European countries have promoted formal participation of youth through national delegate programs, but the EU has been slow in institutionalizing youth delegates. A substantial gap exists between the internal initiatives and the EU's external actions toward youth participation in the climate change regime complex. In our case, there is no clear evidence of strategic alliances between the EU and non-state actors. The EU does not seem to have taken the opportunity presented by the youth wave in climate politics. There is still a substantial gap between informal youth protests and the capacity of climate governmental leaders to transform these protests into formal policy synergies.

On power relations, the lack of dialogue could also be detrimental to the EU's power within the complex. While recent EU efforts to promote youth participation in climate politics are appreciable, our study warns that greater attention to youth does not always translate into meaningful participation. This could harm overall EU legitimacy and its leadership in the climate change regime complex. On legitimacy, young Europeans' lack of formal participation in the external political game creates opposition and criticism rather than support of the EU and its climate agenda. On leadership, the EU needs allies if it wants to foster ambitious international climate policies (Pipart, 2022). While it sometimes lacks governmental allies, engaging with youth actors could be a beneficial strategy.

Overall, this study shows that the EU would benefit from greater engagement with youth in the climate change regime complex, especially in pushing its agenda forward. The EU somewhat limits itself to treating European youth actors as ones who intervene at the national political level (internal politics) instead of capitalizing on their transnational role (external politics). On this aspect, the EU could better support youth across the different institutions of the regime complex. This appears as a missed opportunity for the EU to become a proactive shaper of the regime complex.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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