

The Future of Europe

Astrid Lorenz  
Lisa H. Anders *Editors*

# EU Citizenship Beyond Urban Centres

Perceptions and Practices of Young  
People in East Central European  
Peripheral Areas

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# The Future of Europe

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# Approaching EU Citizenship from the Perspective of Young People in the East Central European Double Periphery: Introduction

Astrid Lorenz  and Lisa H. Anders 

## 1 Aim and Focus of the Volume

Young people of today will shape the EU policies of tomorrow, the Union's political architecture, and further integration or disintegration.<sup>1</sup> Many of them, however, have “become disenchanted with mainstream political parties and with those who claim to speak on their behalf” (see p. 134 in Loader et al. 2014). While this phenomenon is not exclusive to the EU, the European Commission promotes youth participation in democratic life by funding Erasmus+ activities and supporting horizontal exchange about education and youth policies among member states. The aim is to encourage the use of all those formal political rights shared by all EU citizens, for instance, voting in EP elections or participating in a European Citizens' Initiative. However, the preconditions for exercising these rights, i.e. for actively practicing EU citizenship,<sup>2</sup> differ considerably across Europe. Outside Brussels, European capitals, and other urban centres, it is much more difficult to have access to EU politics, dialogues, projects, events, or even information.

This problem seems to be particularly acute in the remote areas of East Central Europe which form a double periphery in relation to the EU and the national centres. Firstly, being located alongside the Eastern frontier of the EU, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania are relatively far away from the EU hubs

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<sup>1</sup>We thank our colleagues from the Leipzig Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence as well as our guests for their very fruitful contributions to the Centre's working program. Many ideas presented here were developed in joint discussions and vivid academic debate. Special thanks go to the editors of the book series for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup>Citizenship endows citizens with economic, social and political rights. We focus on the latter and use the term “active citizenship” for the exercise of formal political rights and other forms of civic and political engagement intended to make one's voice heard.

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of decision-making, lobbying, communication, and wealth in Western Europe (Magone et al. 2016). The proportion of people from the region in the EU's top positions is significantly lower than their share of the population (European Democracy Consulting 2021). At the same time, their voice is weaker, with turnout in EP elections below the EU average.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, some rural areas in these countries are also peripheries within their countries, often struggling with selective out-migration resulting in brain drain and demographic change, poor infrastructures, low GDP, and comparatively low development prospects. While the capitals and their surrounding agglomerations are the political and economic hubs (see p. 1 et seq. in Darvas 2014), peripheral regions are lagging behind and do not equally enjoy the benefits of democratisation, the transition to a market economy, and EU accession (Ágh 2014). This can lead to a downward spiral (see p. 57 in Damsgaard et al. 2011)<sup>4</sup> and entail a lower material or immaterial quality of life, with reduced life chances and "reduced levels of citizenship" (see p. 763 in Kenyon 2011).

Several features of these double peripheries are known to foster EU scepticism and produce low levels of civic engagement. These include a poor public infrastructure and the out-migration of better-educated people, who are mostly more Europhile (see Dijkstra et al. 2020; Basile and Cavallo 2020; p. 3 in Abts and Baute 2021; Schoene 2019). Moreover, national context factors and the evaluation of the own government's performance, which often correlates with the perception of regional perspectives and economic development, is itself connected with EU attitudes (see Brinegar and Jolly 2005; p. 566 in Levy and Phan 2014). Thus, regional discontent with national policies which is widespread in "places that don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose 2018) might also inform EU attitudes. In line with this, EU studies have generally identified a new core-periphery divide, with EU-friendly people living in urban centres and EU-sceptical ones in rural areas.

Young people in these peripheral regions are a particularly relevant group to study. On the one hand, research indicates that they are significantly less EU-enthusiastic than young people in similarly situated regions in Germany and Austria (Kucharczyk et al. 2017), and their participation rate is lower (Sobolewska-Mysłik et al. 2016). On the other hand, cross-national data suggest that younger people are in general more supportive of the EU (see p. 432 in Down and Wilson 2013). In the 2021 EP Youth Survey, young people in large towns and cities had a more positive image of the EU than those in other types of areas. Young people in

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<sup>3</sup>In 2019, it amounted to 28.8% in the Czech Republic, 22.7% in Slovakia, 43.4% in Hungary, 45.7% in Poland and 51.2% in Romania. The comparatively high vote share in Romania is due to a referendum on anticorruption measures held on the same day as the EP election.

<sup>4</sup>As it was impressively described: "notably out-migration and ageing of the population are getting stronger and stronger. These trends create the conditions for social exclusion, and even territorial exclusion, from mainstream socio-economic processes and opportunities. While rural ghettos are mainly a result of social factors, ethnic segregation can make difficult situations worse. This is the case, for example, in rural peripheries of Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania where there are areas with high proportions of Roma population" (see p. 57 in Damsgaard et al. 2011).

rural areas found voting in elections less important than their peers living in large towns or cities (see p. 53, 25 in EP 2021). So far, however, no systematic research has been conducted on what young people in East Central Europe's double periphery think of the EU and how they perceive and practise their EU citizenship.

Against this background, the aim of the present volume is to explore how young people in Europe's double periphery—more precisely in very remote areas of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania—perceive the EU and the rights linked to EU citizenship. It furthermore analyses the challenges of EU youth projects aimed at promoting active citizenship in these regions. The in-depth and comparative analyses in this book are guided by the following overarching key questions: What does it mean for young people in Europe's eastern double periphery to be citizens of the EU? What do they associate with the EU and their rights connected to EU citizenship? What do they think about the EP elections? What factors contribute to the success of EU-related youth dialogue projects in peripheral regions, and what specific challenges do project leaders face? And, more generally, how do the perceptions and practices of EU citizenship differ across remote areas and countries?

To address these questions, the contributions rely on a new and unique collection of qualitative data gathered within the framework of Leipzig University's Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence on "The European Union and its Rural Periphery in East Central Europe", funded by the European Commission.<sup>5</sup> This data was collected through focus group discussions with students in medium-sized towns in peripheral areas of the five countries of interest, as well as interviews with organisers of EU youth dialogue projects.

The book adds to the literature by putting the spotlight on EU citizenship perceptions and the practices of youth in Europe's East Central double periphery. Existing studies on the EU often represent "views from capitals on capitals". They analyse institutional settings, including formal rights and integration, as well as the actors and their interactions in the EU, based on the experience and expertise of political and administrative decision-makers, NGOs, journalists, scholars, etc. working and living in these capitals or other large cities. Much less is known about the views of the addressees of EU policies beyond these urban centres. Certainly, there are studies focusing either on the active citizenship of young people (e.g. Melo and Stockemer 2014; Chevalier 2016; Sloam 2014; Newman and Tonkens 2015) or (young) people and out-migration in European rural areas (e.g. van der Star and Hochstenbach 2022; Thissen et al. 2010), but so far, we are missing a comprehensive study on the EU citizenship perceptions of young people and the peripheral areas in East Central Europe. Overall, we believe that this volume will be of interest to

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<sup>5</sup>"Die Europäische Union und ihre ländliche Peripherie in Ostmitteleuropa—Wahrnehmungen, Praktiken und Potenziale von EU-Bürgerschaft, mit besonderem Fokus auf jungen Menschen (EU-PECE), funded from 15/10/2020 to 14/04/2024, based on Grant Decision № 619,591-EPP-1-2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-CoE.

practitioners and scholars working on Europe and the EU, citizenship, and the promotion of an active EU citizenship.

East Central Europe is not a homogenous region. Obviously, some parties and governments in the region are more EU-sceptic than others, and EU support among the citizens of these countries varies (Lorenz and Anders 2021). Hungarians, for instance, are in general much more supportive of EU membership than Czech people (see p. 87 in Göncz and Lengyel 2021). Similarly, citizenship concepts among adults differ significantly between these countries (Coffé and van der Lippe 2010). At the same time, and as mentioned above, the countries and their remote areas share several features known to affect EU support or engagement. The studies presented in this volume help to better understand if such commonalities go along with similar EU citizenship perceptions and practices or if the picture is more nuanced.<sup>6</sup>

They also have practical implications. Low levels of EU support and participation in remote areas can have long-term negative effects on the democratic practice of the EU. If people are unaware of their opportunities to participate in EU affairs and therefore do not actively partake in European democracy, the widespread perception that Brussels is too distant from ordinary citizens becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and young people might (further) alienate themselves from the EU. In-depth knowledge about the youth's citizenship perceptions and practices in the EU's double periphery allows us to adapt EU youth policies and concrete measures to foster civic engagement. Therefore, this volume also contains recommendations for different audiences of "practitioners" related to the topic—be them politicians, project staff, or scholars, among others.

In the remainder of this chapter, we provide further information about the remote areas of East Central Europe as a double periphery and introduce the concept of EU citizenship. We then go on to briefly discuss the connection between local conditions, citizenship perceptions, and practices. Next, we describe the data and methods and close by providing an overview of the book and a summary of the key findings.

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## 2 Remote Areas in East Central Europe as a Double Periphery

Our interest in young people's perceptions and practices of EU citizenship in remote areas is based on the assumption that space matters for how formally equal rights are known, perceived, and exercised in practice, leading to what has been called a "spatially differentiated nature of *de facto* citizenship" (see p. 439 in Desforges et al. 2005). While the importance of spatial factors is widely acknowledged in sociology, human geography, economics, and planning science, political scientists, and in particular EU scholars, have addressed them comparatively rarely.

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<sup>6</sup>Note that similarities across peripheral areas of the region do not imply that these are regional peculiarities. Such claims would need further comparisons with urban or metropolitan areas and other European countries.

Although definitions of peripheries differ in detail, scholars and political actors use a relatively consistent set of attributes to define them. These are geographic features (location, settlement density, accessibility), as well as socio-economic ones (GDP, income, unemployment). The Territorial Agenda 2030, developed by the ministers responsible for spatial planning, territorial development, and cohesion, understands peripheries as remote and often rural areas that are socio-economically lagging behind (EU 2020).<sup>7</sup> The concept of “inner peripheries” adds to that by including the idea of disconnection—an aspect which is probably very significant with regard to people’s perceptions of EU citizenship in the peripheries. According to this approach, it is mainly the degree of disconnection in terms of access to services and the levels of interaction with the wider world that distinguishes the peripheries from the centres (ESPON 2017).<sup>8</sup> The effects of these factors on socio-economic performance vary between the East and the West. In Western Europe, but also in some other countries, geographical remoteness, difficult accessibility, and low population density are often not directly related to weak socio-economic performance (Werner et al. 2017), while the correlation between the spatial and economic indicators of periphery status in East Central Europe is medium to high. By building on these multidimensional understandings, we measure peripherality by means of socio-economic factors (purchasing power, employment rates, median age) and factors capturing the (dis)connection (travel time to a regional centre, the accessibility of general interest services, see the section on data and methods below).

The notion of “double peripheralisation” was coined by Wallerstein (1974, 1976) as part of his sociological reflections about the capitalist world system. His approach distinguishes three types of hierarchically ranked countries. On top, there are the core countries, i.e. dominant industrialised and urbanised politically and socially privileged countries with advanced market economies, which exploit other countries. On the bottom, there are the peripheral countries which are often agrarian, economically dependent on the core countries, and politically less powerful, and in between are the semi-peripheral states with mixed features. Since Wallerstein stressed that the world system is marked by competition between cores, the notion of “double peripheralisation” is often used to express that a region is peripheral in relation to two competing cores or centres, e.g. the Northwestern and Eastern ones (Sombati and Gábríš 2021).

When speaking of East Central European remote areas as “double peripheral”, we do not take all these ideas into account. We agree that a peripheral status in a wider sense is not solely determined by geographic remoteness but influenced by human decisions on the infrastructure or the patterns of political representation. Our region

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<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Commission’s report on cohesion in the Union analyses territorial disparities along a broad range of geographic and socio-economic factors (European Commission 2022).

<sup>8</sup> As the authors of the study stress, the defining feature of the status of an inner periphery, is “the weakness of interaction, the lack of connectedness, rather than the resulting lagging socio-economic development” (see p. 7 in ESPON 2017). In line with this, “all inner peripheries tend to be lagging behind in socio-economic development, but not all lagging areas are inner peripheries.” (see p. 7 in ESPON 2017)

under study is, for example, undoubtedly geographically located in the centre of Europe, but other factors do affect its de facto peripherality. During the Cold War, the five countries found themselves on the periphery of the Soviet hemisphere. Internally, however, socialist spatial policies promoted a levelling of living conditions, e.g. in the context of having a planned economy (industrial cores in remote regions, industrialised agriculture) and the ideal of a homogeneous socialist society (e.g. a “socialist village”, extensive public services, and political-administrative structures). After 1989, all five countries turned towards the West and joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, respectively. Again, the political centres are outside the region, and now the integration into the EU has deepened the socio-economic, infrastructural, and demographic disparities within these countries. It triggered a significant growth in labour productivity, investment, and infrastructure in Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava, Budapest, and Bucharest, enabling these cities to catch up with Western Europe’s standard of living. Regions that had already been peripheral in socialist times, however, were unable to significantly change their situation after 1989 (see Gorzelak 2009; Pascariu and Pedrosa 2017; p. 102 in Leibert 2013). Although living conditions have improved here as well, they have done so to a much lesser extent than in the capitals, leading to spatial polarisation which has been more pronounced in Romania, Poland, and Hungary than in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Bański 2019).

While we share the idea that peripherality is multidimensional, we do not assume that the EU system’s stability depends on fixed core-periphery relations and that the centre(s) always exploit the margins (see xxvi in Pascariu and Pedrosa 2017). Instead, the interdependences are more complex, also because political decisions can counterbalance economic interaction. Even though there is criticism of an asymmetrical relationship between old and new member states, “inner peripheralisation”, and the unfulfilled promises of “the West” (see p. 106 in Krastev and Holmes 2019; Fomina 2019), the East Central European states benefit from EU membership in financial terms and by acquiring additional rights. So the problem is not a general peripheralisation, but rather the fragmentation of local development and living conditions (Leibert 2013). The EU is aware of the diverging economic and living conditions within and between its member states and spends a large share of its budget on its cohesion policy, intended to reduce such spatial disparities. Therefore, our reference to the double peripherality of the areas under investigation is much more neutral with regard to core-periphery power relations than the traditional Wallerstein approach. It is meant to capture the fact that the regions under investigation are, in many respects, peripheral compared to both the European and the national centres.

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### 3 EU Citizenship and Young People

Citizenship can be understood as having the formal citizenship of (mostly) a state or as membership in a voluntary community of politically active people (Richter 2018; Münkler and Krause 2001, for a discussion of citizenship and the key issues of

citizenship research, see Karolewski 2023). The latter active notion of citizenship presupposes a “direct sense of community membership based on loyalty to a civilisation which is a common possession” (see p. 40 in Marshall 1950). In addition to the sense of belonging, coherence is the second central criterion in the definition of citizenship. It “results from identical characteristics of the members or from an expressive togetherness and from common action” (see p. 667 in Richter 2018, own translation). The perceptions and practices of citizenship are thus basically two sides of the same coin.

EU citizenship, which became a formal legal status with the Maastricht Treaty signed in 1992, differs from traditional citizenship in that it is derived from the citizenships of the EU member states. This means that only citizens of EU member states are EU citizens and that they cannot renounce their EU citizenship.

EU citizenship confers additional economic, social, and political rights to those people holding the citizenship of a member state, including, for instance, the freedom of movement, the right to settle or to work in any member state, the right to vote in EP elections, and the entitlement to social security benefits in the member state of residence.<sup>9</sup> Conditions for politically active EU citizenship are different from those for active citizenship in the national context. The main differences to traditional national citizenship consist in the fact that the EU is a multilingual polity, that decision-making has partly been moved to the supranational level, and thus further away from the citizens themselves, and that it has a weaker connection to the established channels of interest articulation and media coverage.

Formal equal rights do not automatically entail identical understandings of citizenship. Studies distinguish different approaches to citizenship which might affect the perceptions and practices of EU citizenship: Liberal approaches emphasise the same individual liberties that must be provided by the polity, while republican-communitarian approaches stress a common-good orientation in collective action, expressed and reproduced through political interest, active political participation, solidarity, and social engagement (see Dagger 2002; p. 802 in Conover et al. 1991). Traditional concepts define citizenship as tied to inherited membership in a particular cultural or ethnic community, while modern civic conceptions consider citizenship as something that can be acquired, for instance through participation in the social and political institutions of a community. Depending on which different conceptions people have in mind (consciously or unconsciously), their perceptions of EU citizenship might differ considerably. A traditional conception of citizenship, for instance, tends to collide with the idea of membership in two overlapping political communities (see Vogel and Will 2023).

Secondly, EU citizenship and its future are far from uncontroversial. This controversy concerns legitimacy questions—with critics arguing that integration was an

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<sup>9</sup>Prior to its formal establishment, EU citizenship was strongly linked to the internal market requirements, such as the free movement of workers and the prohibition of discrimination. The anchoring of a European community of values with broader rights is a relatively young phenomenon. It has gained momentum since the Single European Act in 1986 (Maas 2014) and manifested itself, for instance, in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights proclaimed in 2000.



elite-driven process (e.g. Habermas 2013) and that “there was never a broad-based movement engaged in EU citizenship policy. Instead, the ECJ began to intervene with “tactical interventions” and thus actively participated in the construction and expansion of Union citizenship rights based on its jurisprudence” (see p. 3 in Wiener 2007). It is also linked to cultural arguments—with advocates of a “demoi-cratic” and cultural pluralism approach arguing “that the already existing forms of democratic life established within the various MS have moral worth for their citizens and that a moral loss would be incurred through their absorption within a more unitary and hierarchically ordered EU federation, which transfers supreme and final legal and political authority on certain issues to the supranational level” (see p. 621 in Bellamy and Kröger 2021). Controversy also surrounds social rights—with some seeing “a social union consisting of European-wide social standards [...] as a strategy for rescuing the European project and fighting social exclusion, youth unemployment, and social inequality in the member states” (p. 678 in Gerhards et al. 2016). Contrary to the ideas underlying demoi-cratic approaches, this would mean to abandon “the idea that nation-states are the sovereign subjects of the treaties” and instead endow the EU with the “juridical and fiscal powers from the nation-states to establish a supranational social policy” (ibid.). Another controversy concerns the political-economic aspects—with scholars observing that the EU’s pre-accession conditionality policy had the effect that “all East Central European growth models are heavily dependent on FDI” (foreign direct investments) and that “integration into the European political economy has encountered increasing political contestation, especially among the Visegrád countries,” which is “mostly articulated along nationalist lines against foreign dependency and control” (see p. 23, 35 in Bohle 2017). These controversies suggest that (young) people do not necessarily perceive EU citizenship as bestowing welcomed additional rights, but might as well associate it with inequality or insecurity or consider it something that has nothing to do with them.

Thirdly, while EU citizens share equal rights, the EU affects them differently. This is because governance mechanisms in different policy fields, such as regional policy, the amount of EU payments, or the compatibility of national economic policies with EU policies (Bohle 2017), vary between member states. Furthermore, there is a lack of EU competences in the field of social policy and social rights, which stand for a developed citizenship in a community (Marshall 1950), such as welfare and security guarantees or the right to education. They are mainly shaped by national policies and therefore vary across the EU (Schmitter and Bauer 2001). This might affect whether people perceive EU citizenship rights, such as freedom of movement, as opportunities or as threats (see, for instance, Vasilopoulou and Talving 2019).

There is a broad theoretical literature on EU citizenship (see, for instance, Bellamy 2008) and its connection to European identity (Karolewski 2010). There are also various surveys on EU citizenship and democracy, but they strongly focus on knowledge about the EU, EU institutions, the rights of EU citizens, and the EP elections. Eurobarometer surveys (e.g. EU 2019a, 2019b, 2020) provide information on how strongly people feel connected to the EU (and Europe), whether they see themselves as EU citizens, whether they know their rights, whether they are satisfied

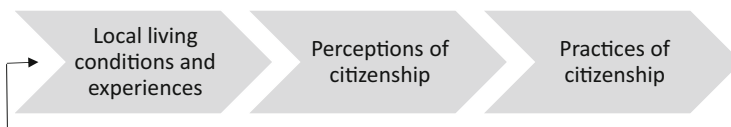
with the functioning of democracy in the EU, and whether they have the impression of being able to influence EU policies. Yet, the closed-ended questions in these surveys do not allow to openly explore individual understandings of citizenship. As it has been criticised, such questions impose “conceptual unity on extremely diverse sets of political processes that mean different things in different contexts” (see p. 10 in Checkel and Katzenstein 2009). Moreover, we do not know how the people’s ideas on these various aspects combine into their overall evaluation of the EU or whether opinions in the rural peripheries beyond urban centres correspond to patterns in national surveys or deviate from them. In fact, the national samples do not allow for small-scale analyses in rural and remote areas. For the social subgroup of young people, too, the Europe-wide surveys with references to the topic of European citizenship allow only limited regional evaluations. Therefore, the qualitative studies in this volume make an important contribution to the literature on EU citizenship.

#### 4 Local Conditions, Citizenship Perceptions, and Practices

Our study is based on the assumption that local living conditions and experiences inform people’s views on politics and rights in general, which in turn influence the patterns of political participation and how societal groups can make their voices heard by politicians (Fig. 1).

Similar ideas of structurally induced perceptions and interests underlie, for example, the cleavage theory, which sees urban and agrarian societal groups, as well as the populations of the centres and peripheries, as historical counterparts with structurally diverging political interests (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Such historically developed groups and resulting conflict lines can be persistent and reemerge. Barlai (2023), for example, finds that the historical conflict between urbanists and agrarian populists in Hungary also shapes the structure of today’s party system. In recent years, many works have identified a new cleavage between communitarian groups, particularly widespread in rural areas, and liberal cosmopolitan groups, mainly urban elites, that has emerged in reaction to the processes of denationalisation and EU integration (de Wilde et al. 2019; Hooghe and Marks 2017). This line of conflict partly corresponds with the classical cleavage between the centre and periphery, enriched with elements of urban-rural cleavage and the conflict between materialism and post-materialism observed by Inglehart.

While these works provide important insights into the causes and the political exploitation of these new conflict lines, the stylized conception of two opposing



**Fig. 1** The basic premise of the study

societal groups—people in urban centres vs. the rural periphery—tends to obscure the variance within these two groups. Besides this, human geography and sociological studies have highlighted the differences between actual and subjectively felt living conditions. Even in areas with medium GDP per capita, people can feel relatively deprived, i.e. of not getting their fair share, regardless of their efforts, and of not achieving overall economic progress when comparing their standard of living with the living conditions in urban centres. At the same time, the local environment of individuals who do not themselves face particularly severe living conditions can be a “potential source of grievances that inform political attitudes” (see p. 103 in Salomo 2019). It can result in “contextually induced discontentment [which] takes the form of feeling disadvantaged against a perceived (urban) majority” (ibid.) and increase democratic discontent.

Recent surveys of the particular group of young people across the EU have shown that “young people from rural areas seem to be repeatedly more optimistic when it comes to assessing the current situation of the rural areas and the employment domain” than their peers living in other places (see p. 16 in Bárta 2020). Given the difficulties in many of these areas, this optimistic view contradicts the finding of contextually induced discontent. On the other hand, a survey conducted in 2021 reveals that only 7.8% of the young people in EU member states think that they can make their voice heard to a large extent on the topic of the development of rural areas and 24.2% feel that they can do so to some extent. This is the lowest level of perceived ability to make one’s voice heard compared to the other policy fields covered by the survey (see p. 8 et seq. in Deželan 2021).

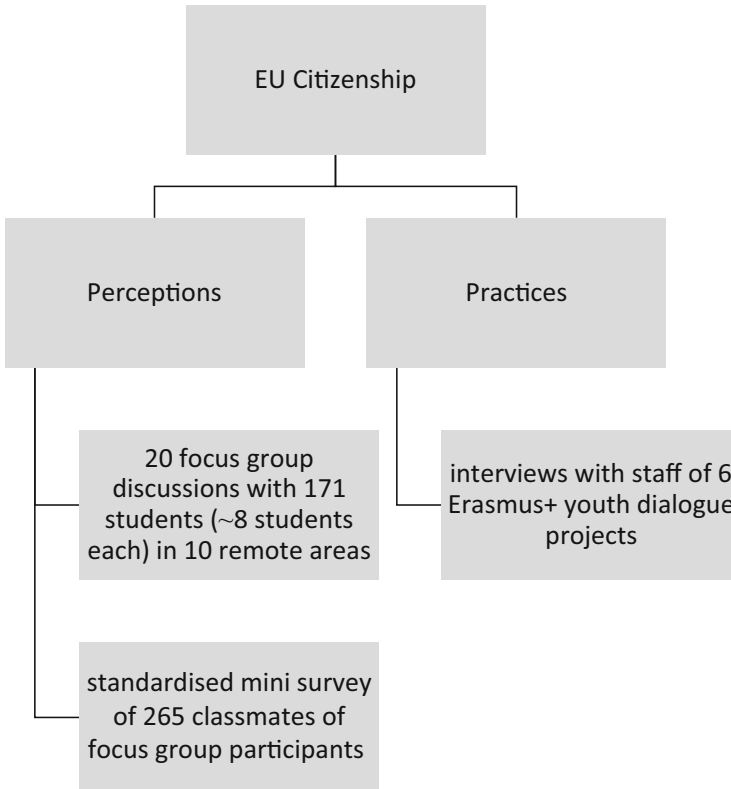
To better understand these data and ambiguities, we need to be open to understanding how the young people in the remote areas themselves perceive their living conditions and look at EU citizenship. This requires a qualitative methodology. We need to explore how young people experience their immediate environment, the EU, and the rights connected to EU citizenship. Contrary to conventional surveys on citizenship, we need to leave room for their associations and narratives.

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## 5 Data and Methods

The analyses in this volume are based on data collected between the autumn of 2021 and the spring of 2022. Data on the young people’s perceptions of EU citizenship was collected by means of 20 focus group discussions with 16- and 17-year-old students in two of the most peripheral NUTS 3 regions in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. We additionally surveyed 265 classmates of the students participating in the group discussions. To learn more about citizenship practices and the possibilities to foster active citizenship, we also conducted semi-structured individual interviews with the leaders of projects engaged in EU-related youth dialogues (see Fig. 2).

To identify the most peripheral NUTS 3 regions within our five countries of interest, we developed a peripherality index measuring peripherality along five indicators: the GDP in purchasing power standards per capita, the employment



**Fig. 2** Data collection methods

rate, and the median age, as well as the travel time to the closest regional centre and the accessibility of several so-called services of general interest (e.g. supermarkets, hospitals, and pharmacies). For each indicator, NUTS 3 regions that performed poorly in comparison to the national averages were given a score of 1.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the index varies between 0 and 5 and captures the degree of peripherality in relation to the respective national context. Building on this index, we then identified the two regions that ranked highest in each country.<sup>11</sup>

Within these regions, we then identified towns with 20,000 to 30,000 inhabitants, and we conducted group discussions and surveys at secondary and vocational schools (the types of schools that the large majority of people in those countries

<sup>10</sup>Poor performance was identified as follows: GDP below 75% of the national average; employment rate below 75% of the national average; median age above the median of the national average; accessibility of the nearest regional centre as well as the accessibility of services of general interest according to PROFECY (ESPON 2017).

<sup>11</sup>In Romania, two of the four most peripheral regions (RO124 and RO314) had no towns with the population in demand.

graduate from). With our focus on these medium-sized towns, which serve as regional centres, we kept the type of settlement and the context conditions constant and were able to conduct group discussions with students from the town and from the surrounding villages and towns who commute to these towns for their schooling. Each group discussion was conducted by two interviewers with four male and four female students. They were around 17-year-old students in the 11th grade and spoke in their native languages.<sup>12</sup> The group discussions lasted about 75 min. Participants were told that the interviewers wanted to know more about what people thought about their lives in the EU. To avoid othering them as “voices of the periphery” and possible looping effects (see Pates 2023), they were not told that the peripherality of the regions had played a role in the selection of their towns and schools.

To keep group discussions comparable, several questions were used as a guide. Six questions concerned the young people’s perceptions of their own personal situation, their town and their plans for the future, their perception of EU citizenship and the rights connected to it, and the EU elections. We also asked under which circumstances the young people would use their rights, e.g. the right to vote. Moreover, students were asked to rank collaboratively 15 EU rights and policies symbolised by pictures by agreeing on the five most and least important EU rights. This allowed us to observe how students discuss their perceptions of the EU within their own peer group.

We intentionally abstained from analysing competences, which receive a lot of attention in the field of educational research regarding citizenship (Elkin and Sołtan 1999; Hoskins et al. 2008; Healy and Malhotra 2010). Although we checked how much the young people know about their rights, we did not place these questions in the centre to leave enough room to explore how young people link their everyday perceptions of the EU by reflecting on EU rights and policies.

Parallel to the focus groups, we surveyed the classmates of the participating students (see the contributions of Vogel and Will 2023). The small standardised survey comprised 12 multiple-choice questions in the students’ native language, among them many questions taken from the Standard Eurobarometer and the Flash Eurobarometer 485 (European Commission 2020a, 2020b).

To analyse the practices of citizenship in projects of informal citizenship education, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the organisers of six EU youth dialogue projects.<sup>13</sup> Such projects are of paramount importance because we know from research on citizenship education that the mere existence of rights and duties and knowledge of them do not imply their use (Gollob et al. 2010). Therefore, democratic citizenship education aims at strengthening democratic attitudes and competences (see p. 20 in Audigier 2000). These include skills “that enable an individual to participate effectively and appropriately in a culture of democracy” (see

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<sup>12</sup>There were two exceptions. In the secondary school in Lučenec (Slovakia), seven students participated. In the vocational school in Moreni (Romania), 20 students participated because of organisational problems.

<sup>13</sup>Interviews were structured by around 40 questions and conducted online and in English.

p. 11 in Barrett 2018, own translation). As experts in the field of youth participation, the organisers of the youth dialogue projects can provide information about the practical aspects of their work in peripheral areas (i.e. the resources and infrastructure), the key challenges, and the factors that can contribute to the lasting impact of such projects. At the same time, we can expect that the project organisers do not provide a neutral evaluation of the challenges and impacts of their projects. They can have vested interests, such as legitimising and securing their own work, and this needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings based on these interviews (Kirtzel and Lorenz 2023).

We focused on projects funded by the EU in 2019 to ensure that the projects were not too far back in time and had already been completed. This meant that the memories of the project organisers were still fresh and allowed us to investigate how they evaluated the effects of the projects. Due to the very low number of EU-funded youth dialogue projects in the rural areas of the five countries of interest, we included two projects in the rural areas of other post-socialist regions (a Latvian project and a project in East Germany). Given the low number of such projects in the rural regions of the countries, our case selection thus covers nearly all of them.

Overall, we think that our broad dataset provides an excellent basis for an in-depth analysis of citizenship perceptions (the first part of the volume) and practices (the second part) as well as for context-specific recommendations for policymakers and people working with young people in rural areas (the third part). Findings based on our data will be of high practical relevance in East Central Europe, with its weaker voter turnout and less formal civil society. Asking open-ended questions allows us to explore the own narratives of these societal groups and their reflections on political efficacy (will my action have an impact?) while new insights from youth dialogue projects help to promote an active local civil society, which is known as a driver of participation from the research on civic education and participation.

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## 6 Structure of the Volume and Major Findings

As mentioned, this book is divided into three parts. The first part draws on the focus group discussions and the small survey and provides insights into young people's perceptions of EU citizenship. The second part of the book builds on the interviews with the organisers of EU youth dialogue projects. It comprises reports on projects promoting EU citizenship in the context of the EU Youth Dialogue and comparative analyses of the challenges and key factors for successful participation and empowerment. Building on that, the third part of the book contains recommendations for local, regional, national, and European decision-makers and for citizenship research. Many of the contributions were written by PhD students as well as Master's students attending a research seminar embedded in the work of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence at Leipzig University. To ensure the coherence and comparability of these contributions, they were based on an identical guideline.

The opening contribution of Pates looks at the subjectivities of peripheralisation, i.e. how young people in regions classified as peripheral perceive their place of residence and what they associate with the EU. Using grounded theory and situational maps, she analyses the metaphors used by the students to describe their living conditions as well as the way they deliberate over emigration and East-West differences and diversity. These findings are discussed in the light of current theoretical debates about peripheralisation, stigmatisation, and the “epidermalisation” of power relations in Europe.

Next, Vogel and Will explore the notions of EU citizenship, knowledge about EU citizenship, support for European integration, and readiness for political participation. They show both that the civic notions of EU citizenship are prevalent among students and that traditional ethnic conceptions are equally compatible with political support for the EU. Besides this, they demonstrate that the perceived peripheralisation does not go along with ethnic concepts of citizenship and low support for the EU.

This is followed by five in-depth analyses of the group discussions in the countries of interest. The contribution of Stosik and Sekunda deals with the perceptions of EU citizenship among young people in the peripheral regions of Poland. It shows that for these young people, the EU seems very distant and that they do not feel particularly connected to other EU citizens. Rather than perceiving the EU as a political community, they see it as an economic union and argue that the EU could create a sense of belonging by providing security on a personal, national, and economic level.

The subsequent contribution by Stangenberger and Formánková sheds light on Czech students’ understandings of EU citizenship. They show that students have difficulties linking EU citizenship to their everyday reality. As the authors show, this is not because EU citizenship rights are not relevant to them, but because they consider core EU citizenship rights, such as freedom of movement, as an absolutely natural part of their lives.

Next, the chapter by Stangenberger examines EU citizenship perceptions among students in peripheral towns in Slovakia. She shows that students have different ideas of the EU. While some consider it a group of solidary states with shared values, others emphasise the importance of the member states themselves.

The contribution by Mandru and Víg analyses students’ EU perceptions in two peripheral towns in Hungary. They demonstrate that while knowledge about the EU is limited, students value the EU for its freedom of movement, the EU-wide right to healthcare, and its financial support for less developed countries.

In the study on the EU perceptions of young people in Romania, Ferenczi and Micu show that students associate the EU with mobility, see a lack of information regarding the EU and the rights associated with EU citizenship, do not consider themselves part of the “European family”, and feel little attachment to European values.

Taken together, the contributions of the first part of this volume provide important insights into EU attitudes in peripheral areas. In contrast to the recent surveys mentioned above, all five case studies reveal that the young people in East Central

Europe's double periphery are not satisfied with their local environment. In all five countries under study, they address the typical problems of peripheral regions, such as the lack of prospects for training and employment opportunities, which forces them to leave for a higher-quality education and reasonably paid jobs, poor public transport, and often also a lack of leisure facilities.

Notwithstanding these difficulties (which most young people believe are a responsibility of the local level), in none of the 20 group discussions did students explicitly express EU-sceptical attitudes or reject the rights connected to EU citizenship. Rather, the discussions reveal that students do associate very different things with the EU and their EU citizenship rights. Apparently, the connection between local conditions and citizenship perceptions is not as straightforward as described in the studies on the divide between the EU-friendly urban residents and the EU-sceptical rural population.

Across the five countries, the focus group discussions additionally revealed that students often lack basic knowledge about the EU and the rights and freedoms connected to EU citizenship. Gaps of knowledge became evident when students reported that they had not yet heard of the elections to the EP (see Stangenberger and Formánková 2023), when they indicated that they were unaware of the exchange opportunities for high school students and apprentices (see Mandru and Víg 2023), when they had questions concerning specific EU policies or rights, or—as it happened in all five countries—when they reported that they had never heard of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The second part of the book comprises case studies and comparative analyses of six EU-funded youth dialogue projects. They provide information on the challenges that project organisers face as well as the factors that can contribute to the success of youth projects aiming to foster active citizenship in peripheral regions.

Based on their comparative assessment of the youth projects, Kirtzel and Lorenz argue that such projects will be particularly successful when they are tailored to target groups, when the participants are already involved in the early stages of organising the projects, when young people can make their voices heard, and when projects link local and European levels. Next, Treimer and Lorenz take a closer look at the practical challenges youth projects in peripheral regions of East Central Europe face. They identify a broad range of challenges and discuss them in light of studies on youth work in Western countries.

The remaining six contributions of the second part of the book provide in-depth insights into the planning, implementation, and effects of Erasmus+ funded youth dialogue projects. Focusing on projects in Poland, Habelt and Despang present the *European Youth Week 2019* conducted in Kielce, and Gawron and Penzlin introduce the *Youth Forum* organised in the small town Mińsk Mazowiecki. Next, Tadzhetdinova and Gutzer describe *Decide on Europe*, a transnational project between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The subsequent contribution by Kónya then sums up the experiences of the Hungarian Federation of the Children's and Youth Municipal Council with its project *(un)Attractive? II*. Then, Bockelmann and Samstag report about the transnational youth project *The Best Is Yet to Come*, and in



the last chapter of the second part of the volume, Jolly and Fikejzl analyse the project *Experiencing and Understanding Democracy and Europe* conducted in Leipzig.

Taken together, these six case studies reveal that financial uncertainty combined with the need for project-based work can limit the lasting success of youth projects. They underline that it takes time to develop the expertise and experiences needed for EU-related youth work and to build the networks necessary for the success of their projects. At the same time, project organisers are confident that their work makes a difference by providing young people with information about the EU and its input channels, activating them, and endowing them with the relevant citizenship competences.

The analyses presented in the first and second parts of the book provide lessons for policymakers and researchers. These are taken up in the third part of the book. The contribution by Lorenz discusses how national governments and regional authorities in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania can contribute to enhancing EU citizenship in peripheral areas. She argues that governments need to ensure equal access to EU-related knowledge by including EU issues in school curricula, improving language education, and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by digitisation. Besides, she recommends creating new incentives to guarantee an equal share of EU-related projects in rural areas.

Next, Stein and Pentzold provide suggestions for local actors on how to foster citizen participation. Drawing on three case studies from Germany, they also underline the potential of digitisation, arguing that it can contribute to (re)connecting the local community and enable young people to shape their regions. The contribution also contains three practical suggestions for on- and offline projects that aim to enhance civic participation in rural regional development. The authors suggest to clearly communicate project relevance to the intended target groups, to exploit the synergies of local projects, for instance by providing a common overview or gateway for information and contacts for these projects, and to provide offline spaces for exchange purposes.

Moving from the local to the EU level, the contribution by Anders discusses how the European Commission and the European Parliament can contribute to enhancing the active citizenship of young people in peripheral areas. She recommends better tailoring knowledge transfer to the needs of young people, enhancing citizenship competences and political efficacy through local participation projects that are linked to the EU level, making project funding more reliable, and putting more effort into ensuring the inclusiveness of bottom-up dialogue formats in order to better connect the overall EU youth policy goals to the diverse living conditions and the needs of young people across the Union.

The third part of the volume is completed with a contribution by Karolewski, who presents recommendations for research on citizenship. He calls for conceptual work, particularly on rural citizenship, and suggests putting more effort into analysing the EU's role in strengthening direct social rights as well as the idea of EU citizenship as a nested and enacted citizenship.

Overall, the contributions to this book reveal that the potential for an active EU citizenship among young people in East Central Europe's double periphery—the

remote areas beyond urban centres—is currently not sufficiently exploited. As long as this is the case, young people risk experiencing a third type of peripheralisation in the EU, manifested in the form of political marginalisation. Most of them do not feel well informed about the EU and the rights and opportunities connected to EU citizenship. Local youth projects can change this, but in the region under investigation, they face many challenges. This book provides in-depth knowledge of these challenges and suggestions on how to solve them.

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## Part I

# Perceptions of EU Citizenship and EU Citizenship Practices in Rural Areas. Evidence from Group Discussions and a Survey





# Peripheral Futurities. Emigration Plans and Sense of Belonging among East Central European Youth

Rebecca Pates 

Peripherality is a matter not only of politics and geography but also of self-identification. One important measure of peripherality as lived experience is the desire of rural youth to emigrate—it is a future imagined elsewhere, coupled with a denigration of those unwilling to relocate. Based on grounded theory, this chapter provides a comparative analysis of focus group discussions conducted with students of the 11th grade in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania on their visions of the future. It comes down to two findings: young people largely articulate their expectations to emigrate, but they talk about this with a great deal of ambivalence. Most want to live within the European Union, seeing in this option a chance to seek their fortune elsewhere as the greatest achievement of EU citizenship. And so, secondly, they think of EU citizenship as an important tool to manage their futures. They thus articulate a functionalist rather than an affectionate relationship with the EU.

## 1 Peripheralisation of Identities and Affective Politics

To label regions or their inhabitants as peripheral is to assign them to a particular place in a representation of order. If the order is spatial, peripherality refers to a setting at a certain distance from a centre, whether this distance be defined in terms of the extendedness of an interstitial area, the travel time to urban centres, or population density. If the order is social, then this assignation refers to a set of people or the relations of these people to a centre of power. For instance, an area of conflict in which power is concentrated at the centre and fragmented at the periphery may be called peripheralised (see p. 42 in Kreckel 1992). Or a group of people may be labelled peripheral to a process, by which they are characterised as marginal,

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second-class, and less heard than those more central to the process (see p. 112 in Deppisch 2022).

Recent literature on peripheralization—that is, studying the way peripheries are produced and reproduced—has to consider socio-economic processes and the role of negative and stereotypical images (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann 2013; Meyer and Miggelbrink 2015), but we cannot assume that peripheralised populations regard themselves as such (see p. 65 in Meyer and Miggelbrink 2015). For whilst peripherality does not have a single meaning, it becomes clear that the label is generally not a favourable one. And so, an area characterised as having such a set of relations or people are considered something less than. Given Ian Hacking’s description of *looping effects* (Hacking 1995), whereby people react to being socially classified by adopting or rejecting the classifications applied to them, we could expect people whom outsiders consider peripheralised to react to that framing of their lives, whether affirmatively and defensively, or by contesting the classification. For people to define themselves as appropriately labelled “peripheral”, it presupposes that they define themselves relative to one centre (or another).

Such labelling as peripheralised might even have positive aspects for the classified, as it gives them an opportunity to frame themselves in contradistinction to a centre. So for instance, the denizens of rural areas might see themselves as being less exposed to the cultural options of their capital or regional centre, or even the political possibilities associated with Brussels, and might also regard themselves as more central in a moral order that might be quite distanced from a capital city and Brussels, but perhaps more resonant to their values. In such situations, it might be the capital, Brussels, or some other urban centre that is seen as peripheral in the moral sense. This might very well involve an alternative moral geography in which their own social setting is viewed as being more central (see p. 49 in Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Malewska-Szałygin 2017), if not in a regional sense, then in a moral or cultural sense. Thus, those peripheralised by geography, the economy, or infrastructure may yet contest their own position in the social order as being on the periphery and refer to the “centre” as the true periphery in a moral sense. There are thus objective and subjective criteria in accordance with which people can be referred to as peripheralised. More research is needed on the subjectivities of peripheralisation, and this chapter seeks to make a modest contribution to the field by analysing a sample of interviews with teenagers in peripheral, East Central European locations.

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## 2 The JMCoE Research Process

In a research project run within the *Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence* at Leipzig University, groups of students in secondary and vocational education were interviewed on their perspectives on EU citizenship; these interviews took place in Nowa Ruda and Sandomierz in Poland, in Karcag and Siófok in Hungary, and in Sokolov and Chrudim in the Czech Republic, all locations selected because they are located in peripheral areas with a relatively low GDP, low employment, a low median age, and poor accessibility (see Lorenz and Anders 2023). Those

interviewed in the winter of 2021/2022 were 11th grade students in upper vocational and secondary schools. The group discussions were collectively interpreted in a research seminar<sup>1</sup> during the summer term of 2022 using grounded theory and situational maps as developed by Adèle Clarke (2005).

Grounded theory is a style of qualitative research that aims at systematically interpreting qualitative data using both inductive and deductive approaches (see p. 15 in Strübing 2014). The analysis of the first case allows for some initial theoretical concepts. This is followed by a three-stage coding process that, as a rule, is a collective process. The first step consists of open coding and the structuring of the material according to themes in an interactive process; the interpretation is intersubjectively secured (ibid., p. 99). The next step consists of developing categories, which are abstracted and generalised themes (see p. 204 in Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014). Finally, selective coding allows for the determination of core categories that serve to explain the phenomena being researched and allows for the generation of the central theory (ibid., 211).

A positional map helps us to reduce the complexity whilst showing the positions people take on with reference to two different sliding scales. Positional maps are a method developed by Adèle Clarke in order to map positions taken by the different protagonists generating data:

Positional maps lay out the major positions taken, and not taken, in the data vis-à-vis particular axes of variation and difference, focus, and controversy found in the situation of concern. The discursive data can include interviews, observations, media discourse materials, websites, and so on. Perhaps most significantly, positional maps are not articulated with persons or groups but rather seek to represent the full range of discursive positions on key issues in the broad situation of concern. They allow multiple positions and even contradictions to be articulated. Discourses are thus disarticulated from their sites of production, decentering them and making analytic complexities more visible. (p. 14 in Clarke et al. 2016; p. 125–136 in Clarke 2005)

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### 3 “People are Drowning in Their Own Mediocrity”

Few students in such a collective setting explicitly identified themselves, especially as they were not asked to do so. They do classify their fellow townsfolk, of whom some are quite critical, when asked how they felt about their place of abode. This devaluation, whilst not ubiquitous, can be unequivocal and disdainful: one student referred to their cohabitants as “people drowning in their own mediocrity” (220113A\_Moreni). The speakers present themselves implicitly as clear-minded about their own lack of mediocrity and as having their heads above the mud. But

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<sup>1</sup>Students involved in the seminar led by the author included: Thea Bernsmann, Hannes Donat, Maren Enke, Antonia Fuchs, Piet Heinrich, Nicholas Kiskemper, Finnja Klinger, Johanna Kurzmann, Jana Laborenz, Matteo Scheuringer, Benjamin Seidel, Julia Steinhöfel, Clemens Streit, Luisa Warmboldt and Marlene Wessel. The contributions of Maren Enke, Johanna Kurzmann and Luisa Warmboldt were particularly important to the first draft of the positional map below.

such categorical devaluative classifications were rare in this research. Most utterances of contempt by the students were gradual rather than categorical: Some regard their town environment as one in which it is difficult for them personally to strive: “It is practically impossible to breathe here” (211118A\_Nowa Ruda).

The metaphors in each case refer to a lack of air, though in the first quote, this lack of air was lethal, perhaps at least brain-damaging, whereas in the second case the focus is on the ability to breathe, perhaps by emigrating. This talk of figurative or actual mortality brought on by residence in these small towns resonates with research on “post-socialist excessive mortality”.

[A] slew of qualitative research also revealed that deindustrialization in former socialist industrial towns led to social disintegration; status loss; the loss of communities; and a cascade of infrastructural, social, and health problems, prolonged stress, depression, and despair in Eastern Europe (see the recent thorough review by Ghodsee and Orenstein 2021). (p. 308 in King et al. 2022)

These “deaths of despair” were initially determined for a subset of an American working-class population (Case and Deaton 2020). The US economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton noticed that before the pandemic, life expectancy had stopped increasing in the United States for white people for the first time since World War II. They argue that this trend is driven by an increased mortality from drugs, alcohol, and suicide among working-class people, and “white” men in particular. Such self-destructive behaviours, they argue, are best explained by a collective “despair” felt as a result of the social changes brought about by rapid industrial decline, which, so they argue, has led to over half a million excess deaths since the turn of the century. As the social scientist Lawrence King and his colleagues argue, such “deaths of despair” are not specific to the US: In Eastern European countries, the decade from 1989 onwards translated into 7.3 million excess deaths (Stuckler 2009). “It represents one of the largest demographic catastrophes seen outside famine or war in recent history” (p. 300 in King et al. 2022). The literature focusses on three hypotheses about the causes of such excess mortality: Firstly, social stress might be caused by the strain associated with the economic reforms. Secondly, working-class alcohol consumption and dysfunctional health habits might be to blame. And thirdly, economic woes lead to declining levels of social and economic capital and thus lead to individual and collective expressions of social disintegration (Case and Deaton 2020).

The post-socialist economic reforms, then, might very well have led to situations in which people in peripheralised areas are particularly sensitive to the decline in social, economic, and environmental capital and find their own aspirations stifled. And the peripheralisation of the inhabitants of these to some extent subordinate regions might additionally inspire opprobrium at their characterisation as such: “The stigmatisation of a certain group may cause direct and negative effects on their living standard, which, in turn, can become manifest and visible in new signs of poverty and deprivation that can easily be viewed as evidence in support of the primal prejudice” (p. 209 in Meyer and Miggelbrink 2013, own translation). So

stigmatisation is part of the “looping effect” described above: the stigma contributes to the social status of those classified as such and serves to justify their devaluation. Thus, those struck by peripheralisation have not only a lack of infrastructure, poverty, life chances, and a general dejection to complain about but also a lack of a future, to which their classification as peripheralised might very well contribute.

The rational response to such economic decline, the attrition of the infrastructure, and the denigration of the population is emigration: “most people like me leave, either to study or for other reasons, and only the adults, the old people, who can’t really change from this point of view, remain” (220113A\_Moreni). Emigration from areas seen as peripheralised is so significant that it is often seen as a characteristic of such areas. Emigration serves as a signifier of the sustainability of a region, and mass emigration without immigration is often part of a spiral of decline: Jobs get lost, fewer children are born, schools are closed, bus lines are discontinued, and a lack of investment soon provides new structures of inequality (see p. 91 in Weber and Fischer 2010; pp. 200–204 in Leibert 2020). The motives for deciding to stay or to emigrate are not merely economic, however, but may include family and regional bonds, local, regional, and national pride, or alternative perspectives for which a peripheralised life might provide advantages. Some have shown the role communication plays in such decisions: The higher the likelihood that everyone talks about the intention to emigrate, the higher the pressure to actually do so (Meyer and Miggelbrink 2015; Wiest 2016). This intention to emigrate, as previous research has shown, correlates with an articulated perspective on the home region as lacking a future. The young come to feel they have to emigrate if they want to pursue a fulfilling life (see pp. 38–41 in Leibert 2015). Those willing to migrate in turn stigmatise those who are deliberating to stay as “not capable of finding the train station”, leading to a situation in which emigration becomes the norm and staying the anomaly (see p. 1041 in Meyer 2018; cf. p. 204 in Leibert 2020).

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#### **4 Our Village “Has No Future”: Deliberations on Emigrating**

Many students who participated in the group discussions clearly articulated their intention to emigrate, frequently articulating this intention while identifying as members of a trans-personal movement. One Polish student said: “I don’t think anyone wants to stay here” (211118B\_Nowa Ruda), or more specifically: “Sandomierz is not that big, and there’s no prospect of living further here because Sandomierz has no future. So, I think people will leave to other cities”, which she names: “if someone wants to develop, then [they will go to] Kraków, Warsaw, Rzeszów, well, ...!” (211116B\_Sandomierz). Another interview in Sandomierz included the utterance: “I don’t see any future in Sandomierz. I’ve lived here for eight years, and I wouldn’t be able to stand it mentally and emotionally.” (211116A\_Sandomierz) A third student in the same group discussion also wanted to leave:

In ten years, I see myself in a bigger city, and if I stay in Poland, I'd also like to go to the army. I definitely wouldn't want to live in such a small city as Sandomierz. I don't like it at all. I don't like the way it functions. For example, there were those construction works there, and the whole city was closed during rush hours. There was no passage from one part to another, and generally everything in Sandomierz is so unorganised. (21116A\_Sandomierz)

The students thus articulate three topics, all related to the futurity of place, and in particular, its lack of it:

- A. A *“place stuck in time” “drowning in mediocrity”* (220113A\_Moreni). One important set of deliberations concerns the accessibility of cultural venues and the possibility of conspicuous consumption: “there could be more nightclubs, zoos, playgrounds, malls, big shopping centres, a university, more kindergartens, more daycares” (220125B\_Karcag). Sometimes this lack of infrastructure makes the students feel like they just want to leave. They occasionally attribute this to a feeling of being pushed out by the characteristics of the area itself. They say, for instance, that the place itself is “stuck in time” (220113A\_Moreni) or is wholly absent and negative, more like a black hole than can only be characterised by absence: “It’s more like a hole where there are only negatives” (21118B\_Nowa Ruda). Some say it explicitly: “Life just forces us [to move]” (21118B\_Nowa Ruda). But most seem to feel disloyal to characterise their hometown or country in this devaluative manner and focus more on what they expect to achieve, choosing their future abode where they deem their chances of success highest.
- B. *“Safest country in the world.” Internal Migration*. Those contemplating regional migration usually focus on larger cities with more opportunities to study and work. One Hungarian student explains that there are reasons to stay—family, their own past—but that this does not suffice to plan a future there:

I would also like to study in Debrecen or Budapest. I would like to be a lawyer. I would also like to stay in Hungary, but preferably in the Transdanubian region. I have no special attachment to Karcag, apart from my family and memories. There are few opportunities, the quality of the roads is... desperate. That’s really all. [...] Because of the better financial opportunities. (220125A\_Karcag)

We see in many of those who are contemplating regional migration very little categorical abnegation of their place of origin: “I would definitely like to settle somewhere in the Czech Republic because just as [another participant of the focus group] mentioned, I think it’s one of the safest countries in the world, a low crime rate and all that. I think overall the standard of living here is high” (211001A\_Chrudim). The debasement of their region is much more a matter of degree: the quality of the roads is worse than elsewhere, the opportunities are fewer, the pay is lower, etc., but here, we see no particular desire to leave, but rather one to arrive at an even better place, with more opportunities for the students personally.

This focus on arriving at a better place, of shaping and taking charge of their own futures, gives many willing students a chance to consider different options, to move regionally first, internationally later, should the first move not go far enough: “I’m not going likely to find a job in my profession, if I do, but I don’t think so, then I will stay in Siófok. The outlook, well, Pest first and then abroad” (211117\_Siófok).

C. “*Big Ambitions*”. *International Migration*. Some students don’t just want to improve their life chances; they have very specific ambitions for which being abroad, in their perspective, is a prerequisite. So, for instance, one student in the Czech Republic sees himself as having big ambitions and as being the boss of his own restaurant:

Well, I would like to become a chef, or just a higher cook, and I would like to build a small business in some other country than here in the Czech Republic in ten years. I would like to go to Germany or Switzerland and build a restaurant there. But those are very big ambitions. (211001B\_Chrudim)

The hopes associated with international careers are connected to higher salaries (“it’s difficult to survive on the lowest average wage”, 211118B\_Nowa Ruda; or “But the reason why we want to leave is that the salary we get in Romania is only enough to live on. If we want something else or want to do something with our lives, we can’t do it with the salary we get in Romania”, 220113B\_Moreni), but frequently, the students are also looking for something else, a sense of belonging, of recognition. One Polish student argues: “the place where I will live in the future will be more friendly to people with the same interests and from the same social group” (211118A\_Nowa Ruda), another in Romania quips: “In Germany, if you throw a cigarette butt on the ground, you get fined. . .” In response, another joked: “Well, yes, bro, civilized people” (220113B\_Moreni).

C1. “*In the West there is a great hatred of communism*”. *Ambivalence*. All students interviewed in this research project who contemplated international migration meant to go to the West, usually to Western or Central European countries. Germany was cited most frequently, as was Sweden. Some also mentioned the United States or Switzerland. But mostly, they seemed to not see this personal migration as one with unmitigated chances of success. As a Romanian student explains:

I would have liked to stay in Romania, but unfortunately I don’t think it’s possible because what I want to do is not so well financially supported in our country, [. . .] it’s not paid very well as in other European Union countries, for [the moment]. [. . .] I’ve obviously researched this topic in many countries, and the most advantageous one seemed to be Germany, although socially I would suffer a little bit, from what I’ve heard, and the people there are not very open. (220113A\_Moreni)

Students elaborate on this perspective:

[T]here's a big difference between the Western states and the Eastern states, there's a certain behaviour that Westerners have shown towards us. What could be the reason? We look at history and we realise that there is this difference: in the West there is a great hatred of communism, the Russians were communists, we were communists, and we realise where it comes from, but we still remained poor. And nobody helps us. (220113A\_Moreni)

Eastern Europe, by contrast, is framed as backward economically and socially, an area “disadvantaged by history”, but also as having this history in common. The students feel as if East (Central) Europeans were assigned a lower rank when they go West. This is an astute observation and correlates with recent sociological research by Hungarian-American sociologist József Böröcz, among others. Böröcz has recently argued that there is a long tradition of anti-Eastern European racism with an imaginary line east of Germany/Austria/Italy, demarcating gradations of whiteness behind a backdrop of “epidermalising” power relations, thereby creating “concentric gradations of putatively decreasing humanity, roughly proportionate to distance from western Europe” (see p. 1123 in Böröcz 2021). He argues that this epidermalising of power relations was compounded by the enlargement of the EU, in an interesting perspective worth quoting at length:

The establishment of the European Union and the unexpected collapse of the political-geographical separation between the eastern more-than-half of the continent and the territories where west European “Whiteness” flourished raised the volume of the conversation concerning the “center of gravity” of proper “Whiteness” and the outside borders. [...] I propose a way to make explicit the two key identity practices that have implicitly emerged in regulating these fields of identity. The first one—I will call it “eurowhiteness”—encapsulates the idea of a self-racialization that is imagined as a pristine, un-tainted “White” subjecthood. It distinguishes itself from identity locations racialised as non-“White,” as well as distancing itself from presumably less immaculate, either diasporic or “eastern” varieties of “Whiteness.” Its counterpoint—I will call it “dirty whiteness”—embodies a demand for acceptance as properly “White” despite the absence of any apparent willingness on part of occupants of the “eurowhite” subject position to accept it as such. [...] The end of the period of state socialism and the opening of the European Union for the movement of all “factors of production,” including labor, resulting in a steep increase in the proportion of east European subjects who had gained experience in working in western Schengen-Land, to a considerable extent working alongside co-workers who had a long experience in being racialized as non-“White,” could have been expected to raise a popular consciousness of anti-racism among east European subjects racialized as “dirty white”. (ibid., 1128–9)

Böröcz thus argues that there are gradients of belonging to the hegemonic European identity, and whilst “EU whiteness” is most frequently contrasted to “non-whiteness” (thought of as “non-European”), there are also those “white but not really” Eastern European identities that are not seen as quite belonging to the EU and which Böröcz suggests calling “dirty white”. As Böröcz argues, the freedom of movement that Schengen provides for all “Schengen-Land” inhabitants comes with different costs attached, and the costs for migrating West are for some higher than for others, as particularly the Romanian students are worried about. “Going West” is



thus not going towards the promised land, even though it solves some economic and personal problems.

So the students, in particular the Romanian students in our study, articulate some trepidation about moving West: They anticipate being assigned a lower social status for coming from a region of lower rank and fear the subsequent disparagement. They explain this assignment as resulting from a disdain for communism, as that will be the narrative framework most likely to have been used by their immediate ancestors. If we follow Böröcz, however, we might see a longer genealogy for this inequality.

C2. *“He’ll kill you in your sleep.” Ambivalence about diversity.* Interestingly, the second source of ambivalence concerning migration concerns diversity. Diversity is articulated as a problem that is not only located “outside”, although in the Czech Republic, the problems that non-European migration allegedly poses for the West are sometimes mentioned, for instance, in Chrudim: “I’m not surprised the Czechs don’t really want the migrants here. So look at what the migrants are doing in Germany.” (211001A\_Chrudim). So, too, diversity is seen as a source of social anxiety. One student recounts how in the same group discussion teased her parents by announcing she would adopt “a black boy”, to which they replied that “when he grows up ‘he’ll kill you in your sleep’”. Such teasing and conjectures about the vagaries of diversity resulting from migration to Western Europe also take on a serious note when students relate their own experiences with diversity in their places of residence. So, when a Czech student tried to mention the good things about her village, she felt unable to answer the question directly and initially took refuge by being ironic whilst talking about an extremely polluting cement plant, but she abandoned the irony (“the worst positive”) when she talked about the inhabitants of her small town as including Roma and Vietnamese migrants:

I live in Prachovice, and it’s nice there [she uses an ironic tone of voice]. We have the cement plant there, a quarry, and if you just stand on a lookout somewhere, it’s nice, it looks like it’s good, but the worst positive I can think of is the Roma. And it’s like, you know, enough, when I moved there, like everything was fine, but now I blame our mayor, and everybody blames her, that she’s supporting them. Like I don’t have anything against them, some of them are nice, hardworking, but we have more shops there, like there’s Vietnamese people there, so they’re always gathering there, just making a mess, ruining the village. It’s nice. We’ve got a newly built outdoor gym up there, we’ve got ponds, we have events, everything, but they’re just trying to ruin it. They’re just trying to basically harm the normal people there, by stealing, puncturing bike tyres and that stuff, so you’re really scared sometimes. (211001B\_Chrudim)

A little defensively, she said, “I have nothing against” Roma, although she blames the social problems of her village on this group and sees them as intentionally creating harm for “normal” people. The distinction between “normal” and ethnicised people is commonplace and shows that Böröcz’s distinction between “Euro-white”, “dirty white”, and “non-white” functions in a number of contexts in which explanations are given for deviance with reference to epidermalisation.

To sum up, peripheralised students talk about migration as a way of moulding their futures, but with a great deal of ambivalence. Many prefer to try their luck initially in their own country. Those who want to emigrate to another country usually aim for Western European countries, mainly because they expect economically advantageous prospects.

Overall, the East-West differentiation plays an important role, with some students (particularly in the interviews from Romania) anticipating discrimination, whilst others (particularly those from Czechia) expect being overwhelmed by the diversity of the Western European population. Generally, the differences between the West and the East under discussion are mainly seen as cultural and economic.

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## 5 Inequality

Cultural inequality saturated the debate among the students in Romania. When the debate came to economic differences, there was much less agreement between them. Some argue that the economic inequality within Europe is so deep and so difficult to overcome that it is better to migrate there rather than attempt to achieve a Western standard of living in their own country. Others argue that it is up to “us” to change the system. The “system” is thus regarded as ultimately responsible for the economic inequality between East and West. We have read earlier about communism as the source of systemic differentiation, but it often remains unclear what the students mean by the term “system”, whether they refer to national or EU politics, nepotism and corruption, globalisation, or capitalism—the term functions as a cypher under which a whole range of options are hidden. Given its systematic intangibility, however, the students find it hard to envisage enacting change:

I think it's more, yeah, the fault of the system [. . .]. It seems like we're a bit forgotten by the world. And it's not our fault, in a way. I mean, yes, we could vote for a different mayor [. . .] but is this system going to change so we could be as educated as other people? (220113A\_Moreni).

But others do see themselves as a potential source for change: “If we don't fight the system, then who will. If we don't change the system, who will change it” (220113A\_Moreni).

Overall, extralocal points of reference play an important role for students in determining their position. Economic, infrastructural, and cultural disparities between imagined regional, national, or international centres are mainly connected with inferiority—as the literature on peripherality leads us to expect. As the students are largely not themselves participants in economic, political, or cultural activities, their narratives reflect the social imaginaries available to them, transmitted by their parents, teachers, and older siblings.

## 6 Oppositional Identities

As the political anthropologist Anna Malewska-Szałygin has argued, rural social imaginaries have in some areas evolved from “the multi-generational experience of organising labour on the family farm, interpreted through the categories of traditional peasant culture, with the notable influence of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church”, an experience she labels “post-peasant” (see p. 68 in Malewska-Szałygin 2020; see also 2011, 2017). This alternative normative pattern is at odds with current political norms, as she argues in a case study of southern Poland:

The post-1989 political-economic reality in Poland has been shaped (to characterize this process in a vastly simplified manner) with the aim of implementing the ideals of liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism. Such ideas, however, quite starkly differ from post-peasant norms. The disparity between the two models consequently encompasses ideological and affective differences. The resulting tension between them causes emotions to escalate. Local affective potentiality, strongly tied up with the post-peasant normative pattern, thus becomes invoked through reports about how reality is being shaped in a liberal direction, which is considered undesirable by the interlocutors. (p. 68 in Malewska-Szałygin 2020)

Malewska-Szałygin shows how older (“multi-generational”) logics are materially based in organisational practices and serve as foils for new identities, in her case, political identities that oppose the “liberal” order and uproot the logics of centrality and peripherality.

These oppositional collective identities are produced through a locally shared repertoire of displayed affects. Such affects, it is often argued, tend to be stereotypical in political contexts (Leavitt 1996; Malewska-Szałygin 2020; Pates and Leser 2021). Thus, one potential practice of resistance against heteronomous peripheralisation is the development of oppositional identities that otherise the liberal status quo as an *actually* peripheral set of values. In Malewska-Szałygin’s case, this means that, for instance, Pride Parades and expressions of sexual diversity are viewed as anomalous, as against nature, in clear contrast to rural values, which are viewed as “normal” and as part of a “legitimized, sacred order” (2020, pp. 71–2). This rural-urban (or, as some would view it, communitarian-cosmopolitan cleavage, though these are not interchangeable) perspective on what is the good or right order is transposed into an international order, as Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk have argued: “Europe and the Global South are seen as the key battlegrounds” by conservative forces (2022, p. 53). Generally, they argue, in as much as modernity is experienced as a “Hobbesian” world of insecurity, fragmentation, individualism, and violence, a “retrotopic” political imagination might very well find its focus in an idealised past (Bauman 2017), for which Russia is playing the role of poster child in some regions (see p. 53 in Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Such retrotopic imaginaries were not found in our research material, but that might very well be due to the questions asked. Previous studies have shown that the “demand for anti-establishment politics” is greater in some areas than others, leading to a politics of localism and regionalism as well as identity politics (Volk and Weisskirchner 2023).

The new strength of some parties that refer to themselves as regionalists rather than nationalists can attest to this strengthening of demand. For instance, the German AfD refers to itself as a “representative” or “voice” of Eastern German interests and identities (Begrich 2018; Weisskircher 2022). But the students in this study did not articulate strong regionalist affects—any positive affection that was mentioned was largely with reference to their own families.

And it is with reference to a future greater sense of belonging that students are considering moving away from the people they love. This futurity is brought to them by the EU, but that does not mean they have to love it:

I don't feel any connection with other EU citizens just because we're in the same EU. I mean, I'm Polish, someone's German, and we're in the same organisation. So what does that change? I mean I really like the fact that we're in the EU because it's easier for us as citizens of Europe, but honestly, what does it change?" (211118A\_Nowa Ruda)

Many of the students go out of their way to emphasise their lack of connection to the EU or Western EU countries, as this Polish girl did. In fact, if you seek a correlation between the politics connecting affects and futurities, you find that students tend to speak about the EU as the one organisation or feature in their lives that could help them plan a future that is outside the dead end in which they articulated finding themselves in at the time of the interviews. Thus, they, one can safely deduce, have a mainly functional attitude towards the EU rather than an affective one.

A positional map helps us see what is going on here (Fig. 1). Terms in the map that appeared more frequently are shown in larger font. So mapping the students' positions in the interviews on the EU shows that the majority of statements made that are regarded as positive concern the economy and finances, but also their personal

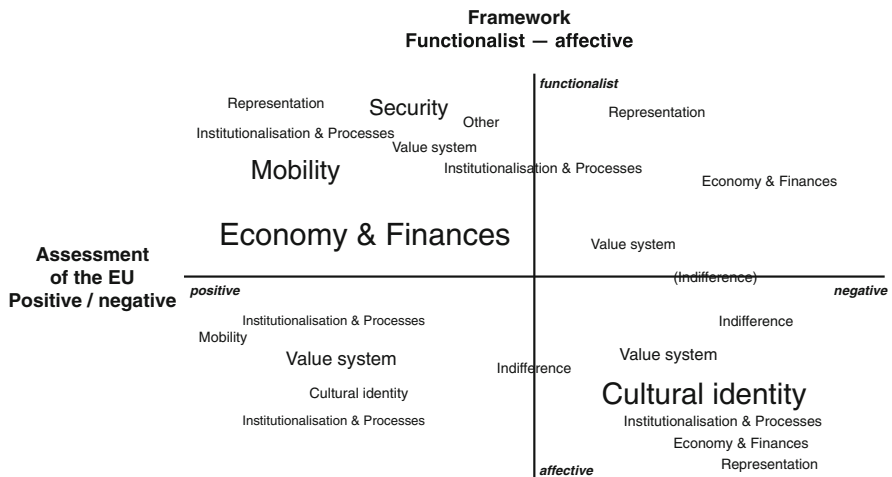


Fig. 1 Positional map on assessment of the EU from a Functionalist or Affective Framework

anticipated mobility and security. These are, however, clearly functional frameworks within which the EU is assessed.

On the negative affective spectrum, we find a cluster of statements relating to students' cultural identities. For instance, a Polish student argues that "for the majority of the Union and for me personally, the Union brings a lot of benefits. But not necessarily the feeling of community, because it is imposed from above. After all, the history of a country or even of a local area is something that everyone will be more familiar with". (211118A\_Nowa Ruda) Students frequently emphasise their attachment to their region and country as incomparably intense compared to their attachment to the EU. Other topics are mentioned—some students regard the EU as more attuned to environmental values, which they hold dear, others feel the EU is more open to allowing abortions to be performed than they prefer; but these value-based issues are rare and can be evaluated positively or negatively. Thus, values can be functional or affective, positive or negative—there is no particular pattern that we could discern in the interviews that would allow us to clearly determine the role of values in the students' evaluations of the EU, unlike cultural identity, which tended to be evaluated as emotionally important to the students, but for which the EU provided more hindrance than help, and unlike migration, which tended to be evaluated as functionally important and for which the EU was deemed an important helper.

We can deduce three things from this map: there is little attachment to the EU, as most positive attributions relate to functionalist framings rather than affective ones. One remedy would pertain to launch more EU initiatives in terms of culture and common EU values. Secondly, there are very few and only very rare functional EU frames that are viewed negatively. And finally, what students appreciate the most, by far, pertaining to the EU is the freedom of movement in that they can relocate as equal citizens to any area or country in which they can work towards fulfilling their dreams. (Mobility through) EU citizenship is, then, what is most attractive for peripheralised East Central European youth than any other function of the EU.

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## 7 In Conclusion

Given the loaded meanings of peripherality, the term can be expected to have implications for the inhabitants of an area so characterised, and not all inhabitants of areas defined as peripheral will regard themselves as such. To be singled out in a study on "peripherality" and European citizenship, then, is to be confronted with the attribution of being seen as either exhibiting the characteristics of peripherality oneself, either in terms of values, the use of dialect, self-identification, or being subject to a second-rate infrastructure. Or of having such characteristics applied to one's social and perhaps familial environment: "Peripheralization should be viewed as a 'multidimensional process' of demotion or downgrading of a socio-spatial unit in relation to other socio-spatial units, one that can only be explained with reference to the interaction of economic, social, and political dimensions" (see p. 374 in Kühn 2015).

Thus, whilst the peripherality of regions or places is indubitably relational (a place may be hard to reach, sparsely populated, or relatively devoid of infrastructure), peripherality as a form of identification is both relational and value-laden. To label someone as coming from a peripheral location brings with it a devaluation, so that it is often the “other” to whom peripherality is assigned.

The students interviewed for this study reacted to their peripheralisation largely by accepting it, and by articulating a desire to emigrate, either nationally or internationally. They, too, characterised those whom they say are unwilling to leave as people without a future, stuck in the mud, so to speak. But simultaneously, they saw their emigration plans with trepidation, as an expulsion, not so much for the promised lands as from a muddy sinkhole that sucked the life out of its residents, and on towards an uncertain future in which their own status would be the ground for battle. And in all this, they see EU citizenship as the way forward, as the guaranteed right to international mobility, allowing them to envisage a future with more options, more money, more success, and better relationships.

What remains to be investigated, however, is the conditions under which the mobility the students envisage is regional or international; in some situations, we found that vocational students tended more towards regional migration, secondary students more towards international migration, and vice versa. Are these bugs or features of the interviews, or is there more going on here? Secondly, it might be worthy of closer analysis why, when it comes to cultural identities, the EU has such little purchase on the students’ hearts, even though many students say that culturally, they feel closer to other Europeans in contrast to, say, Africans—but this does not translate into an affective closeness to the EU.

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## Group discussions (selection)

### Czechia

211001A\_Chrudim, Gymnázium Josefa Ressela (Secondary school)

211001B\_Chrudim, Střední odborná škola a Střední odborné učiliště obchodu a služeb (Secondary vocational school)

20210921A\_Sokolov, Gymnázium Sokolov (Secondary School)

20210921B\_Sokolov, Integrovaná střední škola technická a ekonomická Sokolov (Vocational School)

### Hungary

220125A\_Karcag, Karcagi Nagykun Református Gimnázium (Secondary school)

211117\_Siófok, Siófoki SZC Krúdy Gyula Technikum és Gimnázium (Vocational and secondary school)

## Poland

211118A\_Nowa Ruda, Liceum Ogólnokształcące im. Henryka Sienkiewicza

211118B\_Nowa Ruda, Noworudzka Szkoła Techniczna

211116A\_Sandomierz, Zespół Szkół Gastronomicznych i Hotelarskich im. Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Sandomierzu (Upper secondary school)

211116B\_Sandomierz, Zespół Szkół Gastronomicznych i Hotelarskich im. Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Sandomierzu (Upper vocational and secondary school)

## Romania

220113A\_Moreni, “Ion Luca Caragiale” National College (Secondary school)

220113B\_Moreni, Technological High School “Petrol” (Vocational School)

## Slovakia

20210930A\_Lucenec, Gymnázium Boženy Slančfkovej Timravy Lučenec (Secondary School)

20210929\_Ruzomberok, Spojená škola—Stredná odborná škola obchodu a služieb Ružomberok (Vocational School)

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# Notions of EU Citizenship Among Young People in the Peripheral Regions of East Central Europe

Lars Vogel and David Will

## 1 Introduction

This chapter explores the notions of EU citizenship among young adults in the peripheral regions of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. We follow the political culture approach, assuming the stability and legitimacy of the EU and the process of European integration as linked to the congruence between the institutional structure and the related beliefs and attitudes of the population (Almond and Verba 1963; Easton 1975).

In particular, we focus on EU citizenship, which encompasses both institutional and attitudinal elements. The institutional part of EU citizenship is, in the seminal formulation by Marshall (1950), the legally defined status that bestows all members of a community equally with civil, political, or social rights. Regarding political rights, the Treaty on the European Union from 1993 (TEU) has constituted EU citizenship for all those inhabitants who are nationals of a member state (Article 8.1 TEU) by introducing the following political rights: the right to vote and to be elected both in municipal and European Parliament elections, the right to approach the embassy of any EU member state abroad, and the right to petition the European Parliament or to apply to its ombudsman (see also Lorenz and Anders 2023; Karolewski 2023).

The attitudinal elements of EU citizenship encompass issues of belonging, in particular to the community of the EU, and the dispositions for political participation (Bellamy 2008). Belonging to the EU is considered a postmodern notion, differing from traditional, mostly national concepts of citizenship in at least three respects. (1) It is necessarily defined by civic rather than ethnic or national criteria (Wegscheider and Rezi 2021) due to the multi-national character of the EU. Belonging is less based on the imagined sameness (Anderson 1985) of the

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members of a community in terms of a common ancestry, ethnicity, language, or culture, but established through a common legal and political framework and social and political participation. (2) Accordingly, EU citizenship does describe not only a legal status but also “acts of citizenship” (Isin 2008). Even non-citizens, according to the law, can conduct these acts, thereby claiming citizenship (Karolewski 2010; Bauböck 2001; Bayer et al. 2021).<sup>1</sup> (3) EU citizenship is a multi-level concept, since EU citizens are simultaneously citizens in at least one of the member states of the EU. Thus, acts of citizenship and feelings of belonging can be addressed at the local, regional, national, or EU level and interact with each other. Due to these interactions, the notions of EU citizenship can be derived from the lower levels, or they can offer an alternative or amendment (De Vries 2018). For instance, electoral participation at the EU level can follow the patterns at the respective national level (derivation), i.e. the same parties are elected at both levels, or the EU level offers an alternative venue to voice political protest, i.e. other parties are elected (Hix and Marsh 2011; Boomgaarden et al. 2016).

Along these lines, we formulate five research perspectives guiding our exploration of the notions and evaluations of EU citizenship among students in East Central Europe (ECE).

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## 2 Theoretical Framework and Research Perspectives

### 2.1 Political Participation

If political participation is indeed a core element constituting EU citizenship, the respondents’ readiness to participate at the EU level is an indication of this post-modern conception of EU citizenship based on civic criteria. Accordingly, a lack of readiness for political participation potentially indicates alternative notions of citizenship. We have therefore investigated the readiness for political participation among students in ECE.

### 2.2 Institutional Knowledge

Given that political participation requires knowledge about the legal rights and possibilities to participate and that the multi-level structure of the EU extends this required knowledge, the importance of (political) education for postmodern EU

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<sup>1</sup>While the mentioned studies in political culture assume incongruence between structure and political culture as endangering stability and legitimacy, the mentioned postmodern conceptions of citizenship underline that status and acts of citizenship mutually influence each other. This influence is necessarily accompanied by temporal incongruences between legal status and attitudes, including notions of citizenship. It is, however, an empirical question whether these incongruences indeed cause transformations of citizenship in its legal and attitudinal dimension and whether these transformations either undermine or foster democratic stability and legitimacy.

citizenship has been acknowledged (Inglehart 1970; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Faas 2007; Bayer et al. 2021). In order to be able to actively exercise their rights, citizens need to understand how their different rights (liberal, political, and social) at the different levels overlap or exclude each other and how the institutions of the EU work (Bauböck 2001; see p. 218 in Sommermann 2004).

We have therefore investigated how much students know about their rights as EU citizens and the relation between these rights and their readiness to participate. This is in line with Eurobarometer surveys on citizenship or the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), where knowledge and understanding of citizenship or civic engagement are examined (Schulz et al. 2018).

### 2.3 Belonging

In traditional conceptions of citizenship, citizens constitute a community based on imagined sameness regarding, for instance, ethnic criteria. While in postmodern civic conceptions, citizenship can be acquired through participation in the social and political institutions of a given community, traditional conceptions define citizenship as something inherited through ancestry. Since ancestry cannot be acquired, traditional conceptions are more exclusive compared to civic conceptions, which allow for gaining citizenship by practicing it.

Traditional notions of citizenship are usually linked to the nation-state, while EU citizenship is conceptually linked to the idea of European integration as a postmodern cosmopolitan project designed to transcend national borders (de Wilde et al. 2019). Accordingly, participation in this project could not be restricted to any kind of national community but need to be open to all people claiming their participation. However, EU citizenship is legally linked to national citizenship: people who are not citizens of an EU member state cannot be EU citizens. Likewise, even respondents who base EU citizenship on civic criteria may restrict it to citizens of the member states of the EU. Moreover, the multi-level interaction between national and EU citizenship needs to be considered. If national belonging is considered primordial to EU citizenship, political participation at the national level should be restricted to citizens of the nation-state. In contrast, if respondents give more weight to their EU citizenship compared to their national ones, they may support the political participation of citizens from other EU member states even at the national level in their own country. We have therefore investigated students' ideas about the inclusiveness of political participation to delineate the relation between traditional and postmodern components of EU and national citizenship.

### 2.4 EU Citizenship and Political Support

EU citizenship is embedded in the wider realm of political support for the EU, or the lack thereof, i.e. Euroscepticism (Boomgaarden et al. 2011). In this respect, the attitudinal dimension of postmodern EU citizenship integrates political support for

the community of Europeans (belonging) and support for the regime (political participation) (Ibd., Easton 1975). Research on public opinion has demonstrated that attitudes towards European integration are not unidimensionally consistent pro- or anti-European but include ambiguity. Citizens reject particular dimensions of the EU or European integration, but favour others. We have analysed the linkage between the notion of EU citizenship and the general support for the EU and European integration. We assume a postmodern notion of citizenship to be closely linked to more favourable attitudes towards the membership of one's own country in the EU, due to the border-transcending character of the EU.

## 2.5 The Regional and National Context of EU Citizenship

Marshall (1950) emphasised that citizenship includes *equal* rights for all citizens. In his liberal understanding, equality is restricted to legal equality, so that differences in the actual exercise of rights do not matter for citizenship. Others (e.g. Turner 2009) have argued that such liberal conceptions obscure the inequalities in political participation and self-identification as citizens, which indicate a stratification of citizenship along social, political, or regional divisions.

In this chapter, we are particularly interested in the regional dimension of citizenship, since the regional clustering of economic, demographic, and social disparities has been demonstrated to be particularly strong in ECE (Lang et al. 2015). In general, the differences between regional centres, usually the bigger cities, and their peripheries have deepened in ECE countries after the end of communism. As mentioned also in the introductory chapter of this volume, regions that were already peripheral in socialist times also remained peripheral after 1989, even though the local situation has often improved (see p. xxviii in Pascariu and Pedrosa 2017). In line with this, feelings of relative deprivation vis-à-vis the growth centres are potentially more relevant for these regions than in the peripheries of western EU member states (see p. 6 in ESPON 2017).

We take the issue of peripheral regions in two respects into account. (1) The survey was conducted among young people attending schools in regions that are defined as peripheral according to spatial-infrastructure, demographic, and economic conditions (see section data and methods below). These regional conditions interact with collective and individual perceptions and interpretations. The perceptions and attributions of peripheries and centres are thus not objective entities but the outcomes of individual and collective negotiations embedded in regional and national discourses. Accordingly, we have analysed the subjective perceptions of students about the peripheral status of their region that may coincide with or deviate from the attributed peripheral status.

We assume that the peripheral status of one's own region of living reduces the possibilities for social and political participation. The subjective perception may add to this effect by reducing the incentives to participation due to feelings of futility. Further, if regional marginalisation causes feelings of deprivation among the inhabitants of these places that "don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose 2018), the emotional

attachment to one's own nation and the EU may be reduced, if they are blamed to be responsible for this marginalisation. The multi-level character of EU citizenship may, however, produce opposing effects too. If a peripheral status of one's own region is perceived, its causes or the hitherto failed attempts to deal with it may be attributed to one's own national government rather than to the EU, and the latter may appear as an alternative to overcome this peripheral status (de Vries 2018). Thus, we may also find stronger EU citizenship among students who see their own region of living as peripheral.

We have further considered each country's peculiarities given the differences between the five countries regarding their political and economic situations, their political cultures, and the pathways of transformation to democracy after communism and into the EU afterwards. For instance, earlier studies have shown a generally lower level of political participation in ECE, compared to Western Europe but also country differences that can be traced back to the respective communist legacy (Coffé and van der Lippe 2010). Finally, we compare the results occasionally with the general population to explore the peculiarities of students in peripheral regions.

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### 3 Data and Methods

Between autumn 2021 and spring 2022, within the framework of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence at Leipzig University, structured interviews were conducted with students at selected schools in five EU member states: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. All participants were in the final years of their secondary school education, about 17 years old and attending either a secondary school or a vocational school. They were asked to express their views on European integration, to answer a range of factual questions about EU institutions, as well as to evaluate the European electoral process. These questions were mostly drawn from the Standard Eurobarometer (European Commission 2020a) and the Flash Eurobarometer 485 (European Commission 2020b), which were implemented in February and March 2020 and paid special attention to Europeans' notions, knowledge, and evaluation of EU citizenship.

Field work was preceded by a multi-stage sampling process to ensure only people in peripheral regions participated in the survey. In spatial-infrastructure terms, peripheries are defined as having an impeded access to regional centres and infrastructural services like schools, supermarkets, and administrative offices due to a longer average travel time and lower population density (ESPON 2017). In economic terms, peripheries are regions that underperform regarding GDP, innovations, knowledge-based industries, etc. when compared to national averages. Demographically, peripheral regions are defined by outmigration and an overaged population. Socially and politically, peripheries are perceived as downgraded, left behind, disadvantaged or even marginalised with impeded social participation and reduced access to political decision-making.

We created an index to measure the economic, demographic, and infrastructural living conditions at NUTS 3 level. This index encompassed GDP in purchasing

**Table 1** Participants per country and corresponding weights

Country	<i>n</i>	Weight
CZ	37	1.43
HU	56	0.95
PL	61	0.87
RO	82	0.65
SK	29	1.83

power standards per capita, the employment rate, and the median age, as well as the time spent to reach the next regional centre and the accessibility of several services of general interest (SGIs, e.g. supermarkets, gas stations, and pharmacies). Regions that performed poorly in comparison to the national averages<sup>2</sup> got higher scores, and the two regions with the highest national scores were entered into the sample. We then preselected two towns with 20,000 to 30,000 citizens within each of these regions and contacted local secondary schools there. On site, field teams conducted group discussions (see Kirtzel and Lorenz 2023), while the remaining students completed the structured interviews.

In total, 265 persons completed the survey. Sample size varied between countries, e.g. because of the different class sizes. With 82 completed questionnaires, Romania provided more than twice as many participants as Slovakia (29) or the Czech Republic (37), while Poland and Hungary also provided 61 and 56 questionnaires, respectively. To avoid an overrepresentation of particular countries, we applied post-stratification weighting (Table 1).

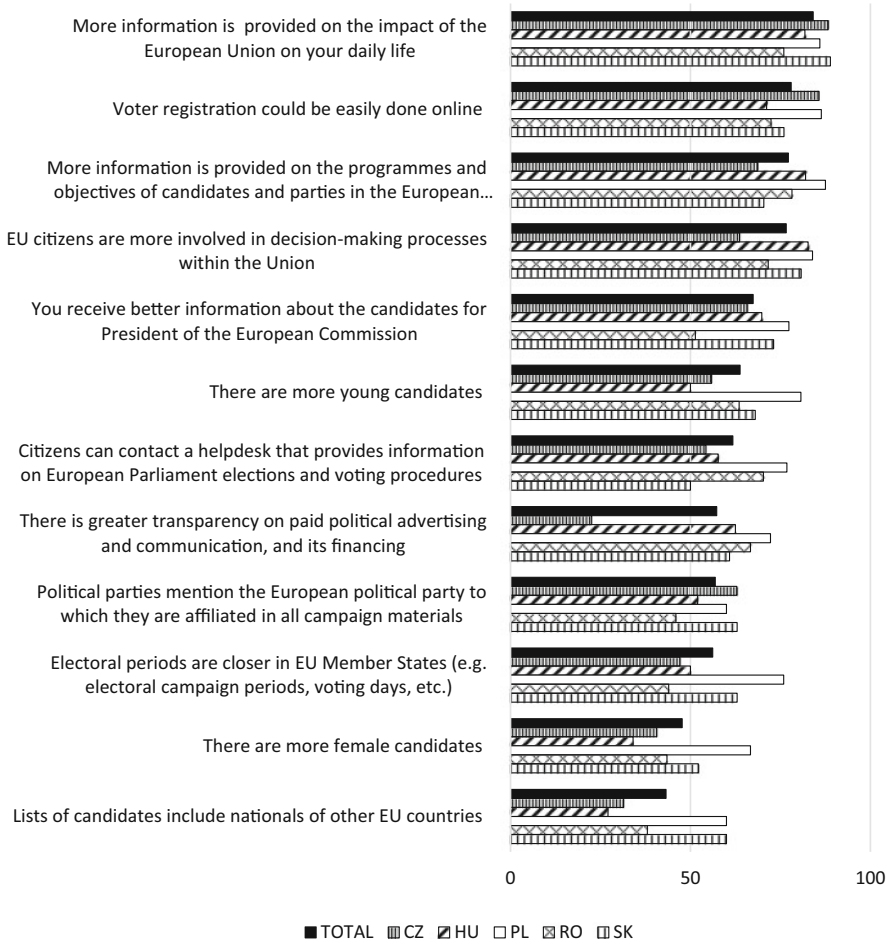
We checked any difference in the results for statistical significance and reported the differences only if they reached a statistical significance at the 5% level but included remarks about potentially interesting results at the 10% level as well.

## 4 Empirical Results

### 4.1 Participation in the Elections to the European Parliament

Our research focuses on students who have not yet voted in the EU elections, which limits their experiences in political participation. Accounting for this status, we derived questions from the Eurobarometer (European Commission 2020b) and asked for a number of measures that the students considered suitable to encourage their own participation in the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. If someone is not willing to participate politically, no measure will be sufficient to increase his/her readiness to do so, while the higher the general inclination to vote, the more measures should be considered to foster participation. Accordingly, the stronger the support for each measure and the higher the overall number of measures supported, the higher the students' actual inclination to vote should be, and vice

<sup>2</sup>Poor performance is defined as less than 75% of the respective national indicator.



**Fig. 1** Support for measures to increase one's own political participation (%)

versa, even though responses in the surveys do not capture any planned action.<sup>3</sup> The measures cover four areas: information/transparency, the changes in electoral rules, the descriptive representation of candidates<sup>4</sup> and how citizens can influence elections more (Fig. 1).

The overall support for the multiple measures among students in ECE reveals a notable ranking. The top four measures are supported by at least three quarters of the

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have a baseline measurement to rule out ceiling effects: If the inclination is already very high, the measures cannot add further to this inclination. Nevertheless, we assume that even students with a very high inclination would still favour such measures.

<sup>4</sup> Descriptive representation means that the social group composition of candidates matches with those of the population in terms of, for instance, age, gender, or nationality.



students in the ECE countries investigated (Fig. 1). Students judge that more information about how the EU impacts their lives is the most important measure for fostering their own electoral participation, which may imply that students feel insufficiently informed about this impact. Among the other top four measures are more information about the political parties and their candidates running in European Parliament elections, online voter registration, and the greater involvement of citizens in the EU decision-making process. With the exception of online registration, the top three measures among the general population in the EU and the students in ECE correspond (*ibid.*).

Further and more detailed information on the candidates for the President of the European Commission, the voting procedures, financial issues, or the relations between national and European parties is less appreciated as encouragement. But each of these more controversial measures is still supported by a majority of students. Among these more debated measures are reforms of the electoral process itself: While harmonisation of the electoral periods between the member states as an incentive is very controversial among students, a majority of around 63% state that they would be encouraged to vote if there were more young candidates.

In contrast, the two other measures of descriptive representation—more women and citizens from other member states as candidates—find no majority support among the students but are the most contested measures. Again, the three least appreciated measures among students in ECE and in the general EU population correspond. Support for transnational lists—the most contested measure—amounts to only around 43% in both groups (*ibid.*).

Based on this information, we established a (mean) index counting each measure that students evaluate as encouraging their own electoral participation. The index ranges from 0 (no measure) to 1 (all measures),<sup>5</sup> and the overall mean for students is 62. On average, students consider almost two-thirds of the measures suitable for increasing their electoral participation, which seems to indicate a general inclination towards political participation among students in the peripheral regions of ECE. There are remarkable country differences: Polish students support almost 75% of the measures, which is the highest level of support; Czech students support only 54%, which marks the lowest level. Students from Romania (57%) and Hungary (60%) are closer to their Czech counterparts, while students from Slovakia (65%) rank in the middle. A similar pattern of country differences regarding the importance of political participation has been demonstrated by earlier research (Coffé and van der Lippe 2010).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>To take the non-responses into account would otherwise reduce the sample on which the index is calculated up to 154 students, and we have allowed two non-responses for each respondent and calculated a mean index on a subsample of 220 students.

<sup>6</sup>Their results showed a rather traditional concept of national citizenship in Hungary and the Czech Republic which value participation less compared to a duty-based commitment towards their own country. In contrast, Polish citizens valued political participation much higher. In attempting to explain these differences, there were claims that the legacies of communism and its ability to penetrate society were much weaker in Poland compared to the Czech Republic.

Regarding the concrete measures, the country differences are especially pronounced (and statistically significant only) for the more contested ones (Fig. 1). In particular, while a majority of students in Poland and Slovakia support the idea of citizens from other EU member states running as EP candidates in their own country, a majority in the remaining three ECE states in our sample reject it. The same pattern appears for more female candidates and a harmonisation of the electoral rules. It is further similar for more young candidates, but this idea finds more support than the previous measures, even in Hungary, Romania, and the Czech Republic. As a national peculiarity, a majority of Czech students reject more transparency in financing as an issue suitable to increase their voting inclination.

The issue of foreign citizens running as candidates is both the most contested measure within and between countries and a core indication of the relation between traditional and postmodern EU citizenship. This justifies a closer look. The general population (surveyed in 2020) and the students in Hungary and the Czech Republic both reject the idea of foreign candidates with a majority of around 70% in each country and group. Students in Poland and Slovakia are more supportive of this measure compared to their respective general populations (42 resp. 36), while the latter is more supportive (62, *ibid.*, 107) than the students in Romania. Thus, students in Hungary and the Czech Republic are in line with the general population in their rejection of postmodern EU citizenship, while students are more postmodern in Poland and Slovakia but less postmodern in Romania.

## 4.2 Knowledge About Citizenship and the Political Process

Students do not seem to be well informed on various matters related to the EU (Table 2). Over the course of the interview, they were asked a dozen factual questions about EU citizenship, a EU citizen's rights, and cross-border electoral participation: How one acquires EU citizenship, under which conditions EU citizens could take up residence in other member states, whether they could seek help from all member state embassies in case of emergency abroad, or if they could participate in elections within other member states. These were all yes or no questions, including a third "I don't know" option.

Counting wrong answers and "don't knows" as a lack of knowledge, participants on average answered only half of the questions (53%) correctly, scoring about as good as a random coin toss. Average scores were almost identical in all countries and across various sociodemographic traits. In particular, students in secondary schools did not score significantly higher than students in vocational schools.

Some issues seem to be easier to answer than others. In particular, basic knowledge about EU citizenship ("I am both a citizen of the EU and my country at the same time") as well as practical matters such as the right to take up residence in member states seem to be much more accessible to the participants. Here, a broad majority—85 and 76%, respectively—gave the correct answer. In other areas, knowledge is less widespread among students. Unsurprisingly, given their hitherto lack of personal involvement, students are especially ill-informed about the

**Table 2** Answers for factual questions on the EU

Item	Correct answers (%)
I am both a citizen of the EU and (NATIONALITY) at the same time	85
I have the right to reside in any Member State of the European Union, subject to certain conditions like having sufficient resources for yourself and your family members	76
When in another Member State, I have the right to be treated in the same way as a national of that State	75
I have the right to make a complaint to the European Commission, European Parliament or European Ombudsman, for example when your EU rights have not been respected by your Member State	63
A citizen of the EU living in (OUR COUNTRY) has the right to vote or to stand as a candidate in municipal elections	63
Citizens of any Member State of the European Union need to apply to become a citizen of the European Union	63
A citizen of the EU living in (OUR COUNTRY) has the right to vote or to stand as a candidate in European Parliament elections	57
When outside the EU, I have the right to seek help from the embassy of any other EU Member State, if your country does not have an embassy there	49
If I so wish, I can choose not to be a citizen of the European Union	38
I have the right to participate in a citizens' initiative, a request signed by at least one million EU citizens inviting the European Commission to propose a new policy measure	34
A citizen of the EU living in (OUR COUNTRY) has the right to vote or to stand as a candidate in elections to the national Parliament	18
A citizen of the EU living in (OUR COUNTRY) has the right to vote or to stand as a candidate in regional elections (by "regional" we mean any sub-national level of government between municipalities and the State)	7

institutional process of political participation. Only a third of them (34%) knew about the possibility to sign a citizens' initiative, and less than one out of five (18%) knew that EU citizens could *not* participate in foreign national or regional elections (7%). Only 38% of the students knew it would not be possible to opt out of EU citizenship as a national of a member state.

Institutional knowledge is linked to students' attitudes towards the EU. Students who answered that their country should remain in the EU on average scored about 7% better on factual questions than those that chose the "leave" vote. Higher scores also go along with participants expressing a slightly stronger emotional attachment towards the EU—at least at a 10% significance level—while bearing no such effect on national attachment.

### 4.3 Postmodern and Traditional Notions of Belonging

Students were also asked to give their normative ideas on the rights of European citizens: Whether they would consider it justified for EU citizens of another EU

member state to participate in national elections and referendums in their country of residence, if these people should be allowed to vote and stand as candidates in regional elections in their country of residence, and if EU citizens should be allowed to choose between participating in the national elections of their country of origin and their country of residence. As a measure of robustness, this last question was posed twice and rephrased (“Should they be only allowed to vote in their country of origin?”) a second time. Given that suffrage is a core feature of citizenship in democracies, these questions measure whether students consider foreign EU citizens as legitimate members of their own national polity. This indicates students’ notions of EU citizenship. In postmodern civic citizenship, all members of a polity should be equipped with equal rights, no matter their origin or background. In traditional citizenship, nationally defined communities remain an important point of reference. In this sense, foreign nationals, even if they are EU citizens, are considered outsiders.

On each issue, the majority of students expressed postmodern notions of EU citizenship: 76% of them say they would consider it justified for foreign EU citizens to participate in national elections within their country of residence, about the same share (72%) say EU citizens should be allowed to vote and stand as candidates in the regional elections of their country of residence, and 69% said EU citizens should be allowed to choose between the national elections in their country of origin and their country of residence, with a similar share (61%) giving the same answer in the control question. There are no significant differences between various sociodemographic traits except for perceived peripherality<sup>7</sup>: The worse students rate their region’s quality of life in comparison to national standards, the *more* they deem foreigners’ participation in regional elections as justified, ranging from 62% approval among the most optimistic up to 84% approval among those who consider the regional quality of life worse than in other parts of their country.

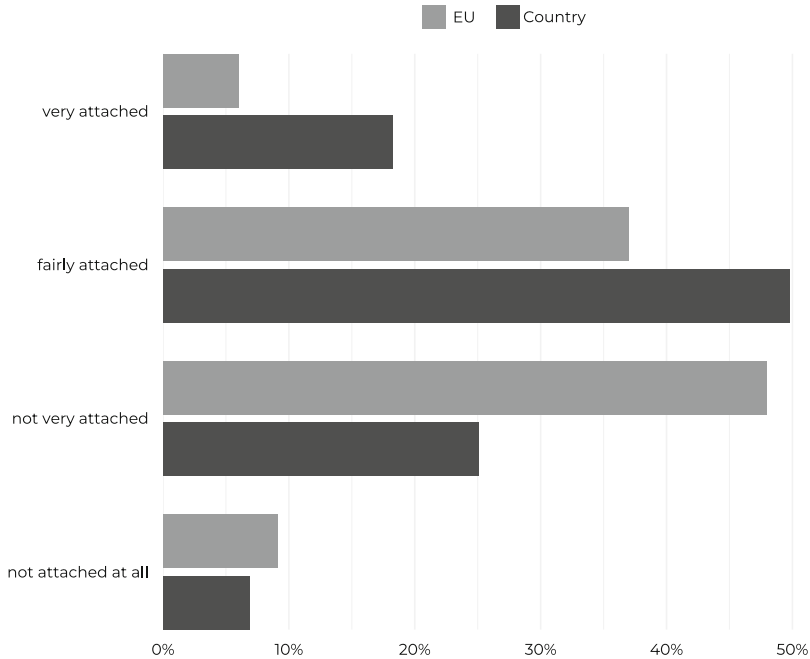
A closer look, however, raises the question of whether students might have had some trouble understanding what they were being asked. While similar shares expressed postmodern views both in the question of whether EU citizens should be allowed to choose between national elections and in the inverse control question, these were not necessarily the same people: the two items have a correlation coefficient of only  $-0.4$ .

#### **4.4 Political Support for the EU: Attachment, Benefits, and Politicisation**

The surveyed students in peripheral regions in ECE are moderately attached to the EU. About two out of five people (43%) declared to feel at least some level of emotional attachment to it (Fig. 2), while about two out of three participants (68%) expressed attachment to their own country. These results are in line with sentiments

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<sup>7</sup>Perceived peripherality was measured by a question on the living conditions in one’s own region s. 4.4.



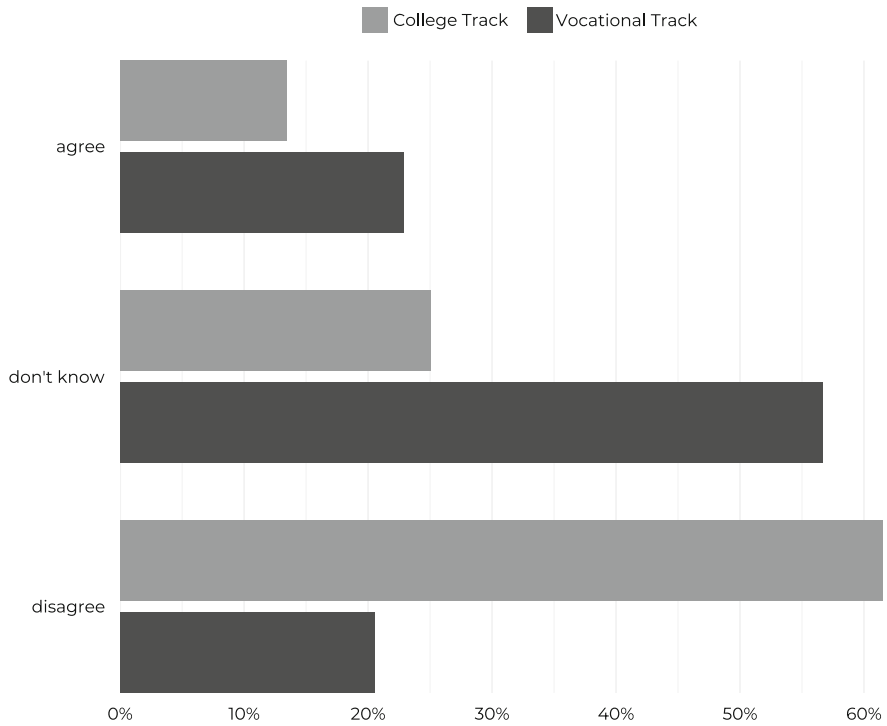
**Fig. 2** Reported attachment to the EU/country

among the general population, although weaker for both items. As we know from the Eurobarometer (2020b), 60% of the people in the EU feel at least some level of attachment to the European Union, while a staggering 92% say the same for their own country. Similar to the general population (Clark and Rohrschneider 2019), attachment to the EU and to one's own country is not mutually exclusive, but moderately positively connected. The more students express attachment to the EU, the more they are attached to their own country, and vice versa. However, the connection is only moderate ( $r = 0.22$ ).

Along the same lines, students are not overwhelmingly convinced of the benefits of European integration. When confronted with the statement that their country could “better face the future outside the European Union”, only half the participants disagree, around one-third say they don't know, and about one out of five students agree.

Responses vary by education (Fig. 3). Among students in secondary schools, 61% say their country should remain within the EU, putting them close to the results among the general population (66%). In comparison, students in vocational schools are much less convinced: 57% of them “don't know” whether their country should leave the EU, with about one fifth choosing each the leave and the remain option.

Perceived peripherality also weighs in on this issue. Students had been asked to rate the quality of life in their region in comparison to other regions within their country, with a majority of 57% rating it as “just as good as elsewhere in my

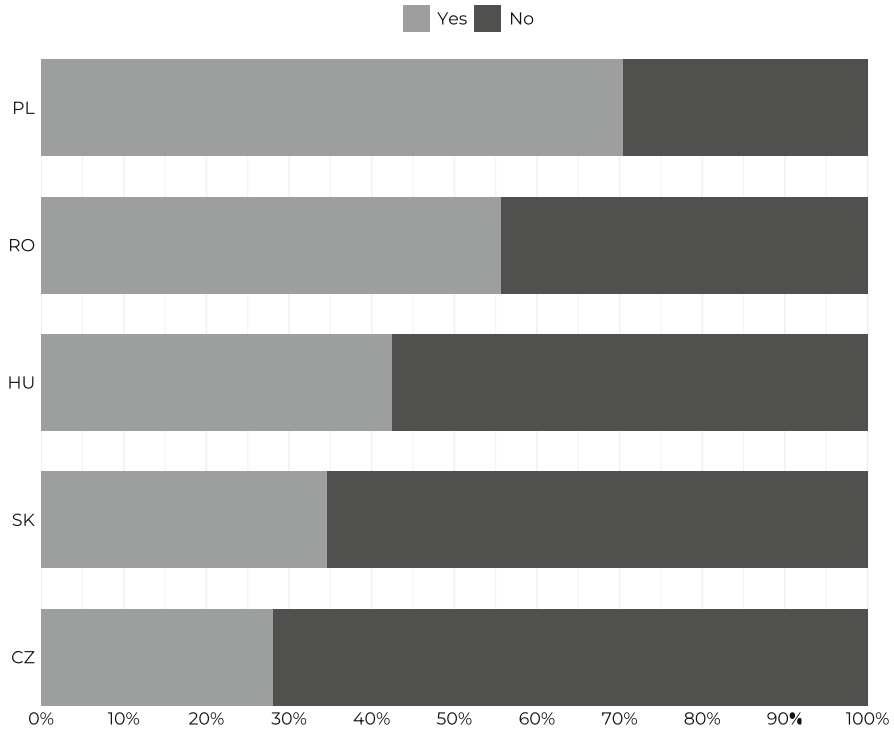


**Fig. 3** “Our country could better face the future outside the EU”

country” and about one fifth each saying the quality of life was worse (22%) or better (21%) than elsewhere. When faced with the hypothetical option of leaving the EU, those showing a great deal of satisfaction with their regional quality of life were *more* inclined to be in favour of the leave vote (33%), compared to students who evaluated regional life quality on par with (16%) or worse than in other parts of the country (12%).

The perceived politicisation of EU integration, i.e. the controversial discussion of this issue among the population, differs between students in different countries (Fig. 4). About half of the surveyed students (46%) said people they knew talk about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership. However, these numbers vary greatly: from a mere 28% in the Czech Republic to 56% in Romania and a staggering 70% in Poland.

Finally, we assume that students’ political support for EU integration is linked to their notions of EU citizenship: The more someone emphasises the need for national boundaries for democratic participation, the lower the overall support for EU integration as a border-transcending project should be. Empirically, however, there is no link between the notion of citizenship and political support for EU membership. Students who expressed more traditional views on citizenship, i.e. rejecting foreign EU citizens from national elections, are not more likely to say their country would be



**Fig. 4** “How people I know address the advantages and disadvantages of the EU”

better off without the EU than students with a postmodern notion. This lack of connection between the notions of citizenship and the evaluation of the EU might be based on the lack of relevance of the questions on electoral participation in the daily lives of students. Moreover, this result underlines the multidimensionality of attitudes towards the EU: No matter which notion of EU citizenship students share, they are equally in favour of EU membership, implying that students in peripheral regions in ECE can be in favour of EU integration, while still upholding the need for exclusive national polities.

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter investigated how young people at the brink of political maturity in ECE think about EU citizenship and European integration in general: how they feel about EU integration and multi-level communities, whether they are informed about their rights and the possibilities connected to EU integration, and what might encourage them to take part in it. Drawing on questions from the Standard and the Flash Eurobarometer, we have interviewed 265 students in peripheral regions in five countries.

Our starting point has been the political culture approach, applied in particular to the correspondence between the legal regulations (structure) and the normative and attitudinal notions of EU citizenship (culture). The surveyed students displayed a general readiness for political participation at the EU level, a moderate emotional attachment to the European Union, and a widespread acceptance of the political participation of foreigners in their own country even at the national level. Accordingly, the majority of the surveyed students share a postmodern notion of citizenship that corresponds with the legal regulations and the normative conceptions linked to EU integration as a border-transcending process based on the democratic equality of its members, no matter which member state they come from.

However, there are caveats to this interpretation due to the obvious ambiguities in their attitudes. Students' attachment to their own nation is more pronounced than their attachment to the EU; their knowledge and understanding of the political rights EU integration entails are partially fuzzy and revolve mainly around the possibility to travel and work within the EU, students feel not sufficiently informed about EP elections, they have no actual experience in political participation at the EU level, and they are not enthusiastically rejecting the idea that leaving the EU would be advantageous for their own country.

Further, the notions of citizenship are moderately stratified along the lines of nationality, education, and the subjective perception of the peripheral status of one's own region. Support for postmodern notions of citizenship seems to be particularly strong in Poland and Slovakia compared to the other ECE countries in the sample, in particular to Hungary and the Czech Republic. The kind of education, i.e. vocational or college, does not matter for political knowledge about EU citizenship, but is positively linked to the general support for EU membership in one's own country. This result implies that education in school has its impact not so much via information but via other channels like the selectivity of the school system, accompanied by an outlook on occupational and social advancement, etc. While all the surveyed students live in regions defined as peripheral regarding statistical measures, only a minority perceive their region as disadvantaged. This subjective dimension matters, nevertheless, for their notion of EU citizenship. Especially those students who perceive their own region as advantageous, compared to other regions, have less knowledge about EU citizenship, perceive their own country's exit from the EU as more advantageous, and are less—although still by a majority—in favour of foreign candidates on domestic party lists in the EU elections. A cautious interpretation might be that these students attribute the perceived superiority of their own region to their respective national government and perceive the EU as endangering this status by, presumably, either redistributive or neoliberal measures that challenge the regional economy, or through increased immigration.

Finally, EU citizenship appears as a discrete dimension in the multidimensional pattern of attitudes towards the EU. No matter whether students share a postmodern or a rather traditional notion of EU citizenship, they are equally in favour of EU membership, implying that even nationally derived notions of EU citizenship can be compatible with a general support for EU integration. This result provides tentative empirical support for the assumption of postmodern citizenship conceptions: Not



every incongruence between the political-legal structure and political culture endangers political support.

The reported results are the first explorations into the issue of EU citizenship among students in the peripheral regions of ECE. Although the sampling procedure was designed for multi-stage random sampling, some (self-)selectivity at the level of the students cannot be ruled out nor controlled for due to our lack of knowledge about the target population. Since external validity is restricted and cautious generalisation is required, the results should be considered preliminary tendencies that may serve as a starting point for further research. This research should include students from non-peripheral regions to allow comparisons and, hence, the identification of the peculiarities of peripheral regions.

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# No Strong Sense of Belonging and the EU as a Security-Provider: How Young People in Rural Poland Perceive EU Citizenship

Jolanthe Stosik and Tomasz Sekunda

## 1 Introduction

Polish society seems to have an ambivalent relationship with the European Union. On the one hand, trust in the EU is higher in Poland than in the EU average, and Polish people show more confidence in the European Union than in their national government (European Commission 2022). Furthermore, 79% of Poles consider themselves citizens of the EU, which is also above the EU average of 71% (ibid.). On the other hand, one of the two parties that have dominated both national and EU politics in Poland since the EU accession—the right-wing conservative Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość—PiS)—is rather skeptical of the EU in general and of efforts to further deepen European integration in particular (Szczerbiak 2020), while the conservative-liberal Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska—PO) takes a predominantly EU-friendly stance.

European Parliament elections in Poland have usually been won by the party in power at the time. Accordingly, the PO and PiS have been taking turns winning elections to the European Parliament for years. Traditionally, the voter turnout for the European Parliament is significantly lower compared to local, presidential, and parliamentary elections. In 2019, the highest turnout in European elections was recorded at 46%. In that election, PiS secured 45.4% of the votes, followed by the Koalicja Europejska (KE, European Coalition, consisting of the PO and other pro-European parties) which received 38.5% of the votes (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza n.d.; see p. 192 in Szczerbiak 2020). Young people in the age group of 18–25 years tend to cast their votes less frequently than voters in other age groups

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(see p. 26 et. seq in Bartłomiej 2014). In general, they have a positive attitude towards the EU and oppose the idea of leaving the union (Rzeczpospolita Polska 2018).

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## 2 Towns, Schools, and Discussion Participants

Group discussions were conducted in two towns, each having about 22,000 inhabitants. Sandomierz is a municipality on the Vistula River in southeastern Poland; Nowa Ruda is a town in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship, in the south-western part of Poland, close to the Czech Republic (Urząd Miejski w Sandomierzu 2022; see p. 1 in Urząd Statystyczny we Wrocławiu 2020).

Infrastructurally, Sandomierz is well connected by the rural roads to larger cities in the surrounding area, such as to Kraków and to Rzeszów. However, train connections to nearby major cities are poor. The town has a very clean, well-preserved historical old town with a pedestrian zone and a market square. In the centre there are smaller, largely renovated, two-storey buildings, several baroque churches, and numerous restaurants, cafes, and retail stores. Sandomierz is very well developed for tourism, with many signs for cycling and hiking trails, multilingual information boards, and tourist information. In both the 2019 national parliamentary election and the 2019 EP election, the Eurosceptic PiS party won most of the votes. In the election to the Polish Lower House of Parliament, PiS received 41.4%, followed by the Civic Coalition with 22.9% (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza 2019). In the EP election, PiS came out on top with 56.98%, obtaining significantly more votes than the national average, followed by Koalicja Europejska with 31.5% (Kolera 2019).

Nowa Ruda is distinguished by a well-preserved and clean town centre with renovated two-to-three-storey tenement houses around the main market square. The rest of the old town consists mainly of small streets with narrow sidewalks and many old houses in need of renovation. Infrastructurally, the town is connected with other regional cities by local roads as well as by railway lines. However, only a few trains stop there per day. As far as gastronomy is concerned, there is only one café and one bistro in the market square and a few bakeries and corner stores in the immediate vicinity, as well as numerous banks, pharmacies, and two medical centres. Economically, the most important industries in Nowa Ruda in the past were textile manufacturing and mining. Nowadays, there are only a few industrial plants still operating.

In contrast to Sandomierz, the Koalicja Europejska received 47.9% of the votes in the 2019 EP elections, but the PiS party was also strong with 36.6% (Polska Agencja Prasowa 2019). National elections held in the same year were won by KE as well, although this time by a smaller margin. While KE received 39.3%, PiS came in second with 36.3% (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza 2019).

In Sandomierz, the high school and the vocational school, where group discussions were conducted, share a large building complex. Centrally located and directly across from a bus station, the building is a typical renovated pre-fab building

from the 1970s and rather inconspicuous. A total of 340 students attend the school. The vocational school specialises in the gastronomy and hotel industries. The high school has a military class supported by the Ministry of Defense, which is why some students wore a soldier's uniform during the group interview. All participants in the group discussions were selected in advance by a teacher. During both discussions, a secretary was present in the adjoining room, who motivated the students to participate actively at the beginning.

The participating schools in Nowa Ruda are located on opposite sides of the town. The high school is situated in the middle of a residential area, not far from the central market square, in a newly renovated building with three floors. A total of 260 students attend the school. In contrast, the vocational school is located further from the town centre, consists of a single-storey building, and does not appear to have been renovated for a long time. Approximately 300 students attend this school, whose profile specialises in educating businessmen, electricians, graphic designers, hotel staff, IT specialists, and mechanics. At the beginning of the group discussion, a teacher was present who listened to the interviewers' introduction, motivated the students to participate actively, and then left. The discussion at the vocational school was conducted without the presence of a teacher.

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### **3 The Situation of the Young People and Their Self-image as Citizens**

The group discussions were started with questions concerning the students' plans in 10 years, the advantages and disadvantages of their place of residence, and their responsibilities for any problems. Overall, all groups indicated a lack of prospects regarding local training and job opportunities. They argued that those who want to continue their education and develop their skills have few opportunities in Sandomierz or Nowa Ruda. As a result, most participants are thinking of leaving the town in which they currently attend school. While few of them consider going to one of the "big cities", others stated they could imagine going abroad.

In both towns, some students also expressed a certain dissatisfaction and feeling of lack of prospects on a national level, speaking of a general malaise, a lack of respect for human rights, and low wages by international standards. Against this backdrop, it is not always clear whether emigration is voluntary or not. For example, students at the vocational school in Nowa Ruda argued that they feel compelled to leave Poland because they have no other option, but that it is not an easy choice because of their family ties. Whereas high school students in Sandomierz stressed that job security should not depend on one's place of residence.

Students also mentioned the merits of their towns. Thus, students from Sandomierz highlighted the town as a popular tourist destination with cultural attractions and short walking routes. They argued that the town and the region benefited from a TV series recently produced there. Similarly, the high school students in Nowa Ruda praised the beautiful scenic surroundings as well as the

events organised by the cultural centre, while the group from the vocational school found it more difficult to articulate the positive aspects of the town.

In general, however, students tended to highlight problems rather than the positive sides of their towns. In both places, they mentioned a lack of urban organisation. In Sandomierz, the students referred to the unclear road traffic regulations and complained about construction work and how the functioning of the city causes disorganisation. In Nowa Ruda, they were particularly vocal about issues concerning public transport, which is poorly developed. Buses are often delayed or spontaneously cancelled. Moreover, they mentioned the problem of air pollution, which makes it difficult to breathe during the heating season.

In each group discussion, students considered the authorities at the municipal level to be politically responsible. For the students of Nowa Ruda, the inhabitants can also play an essential role, but they argued that due to the exodus of young adults, it is mainly older people who, despite their dissatisfaction, do not show a willingness and have no ambitions for change.

When asked about the meaning of EU citizenship and their links to other EU citizens, most students indicated that they did not feel particularly connected to other EU citizens. Few admitted a certain connection to other EU citizens by simply belonging to the EU and therefore enjoying privileges, but in general they stated that EU citizenship is less relevant for them than having a state one. In both schools in Sandomierz, students stated that EU citizenship was not relevant to them compared to national citizenship and that there was little public interest in general. Similar statements were expressed by students in both schools in Nowa Ruda. For example, some of the respondents admitted that they hardly know anything about the EU because EU issues do not affect their everyday lives. The low relevance of EU citizenship among the students in peripheral regions is remarkable, considering that roughly 80% of the Poles, as mentioned at the beginning, identify themselves as citizens of the EU.

In the course of the discussion, students talked about some factors conducive to feeling connected to other EU citizens. They argued, for instance, that freedom to travel provides a certain basis for a sense of togetherness. Besides this, some mentioned the interdependence between different people, describing the EU as an economic union in which EU citizens work for and benefit from each other. The vocational school students in Sandomierz expressed the desire for the mutual support of the EU countries regarding border protection as an aspect of feeling more European. Soldiers and volunteers should come to Poland to jointly secure the EU's external border. The introduction of the Euro to stabilise prices and a common EU holiday were also mentioned as concrete measures to create a sense of community. Moreover, the vocational students in Nowa Ruda discussed the financial support of rural regions by the EU. According to some students, the EU invests lots of money in major cities, such as Wrocław, whereas more money should be given to smaller municipalities.

Further statements referred to cultural differences within the EU and also to the overall difference between EU and non-EU countries. While some stated that communication with EU citizens is easier than with non-citizens of the EU, and

some clearly demarcated themselves from people outside the European continent to show a certain attachment to EU citizens, others emphasised the cultural characteristics of each country and the resulting cultural differences among European nations.

The question of whether the students had ever heard of the “Conference on the Future of Europe” was unequivocally negated by most of the respondents. In addition to queries and hesitant answers, there was some speculation and confusion with other events. Only at the high school in Nowa Ruda did one student say that she had already taken part in a debate on the future of Europe. A second student had heard about it before, but could not give any detailed information about it.

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## 4 Perceptions of the EU and EU Rights

When asked to rank the policies, rights, and freedoms provided by the EU, responses as well as the manner of the discussion varied from group to group. While the group from the high school in Nowa Ruda had a rather lively discussion, the members of the other groups gave rather superficial answers and supported their decisions with arguments in individual cases. Notwithstanding these differences, it turned out that some rights, such as access to clean water and health care, were crucial to all groups. Moreover, nearly all groups chose peace as one of the most necessary achievements of the EU. Apart from that, the groups considered different aspects important. The high school students from Nowa Ruda were particularly vocal about non-discrimination and access to an independent judiciary. Participants in the vocational school, on the other hand, found voting rights and freedom of movement particularly important. For the vocational school students in Sandomierz, the European funds and the right to protest were essential. The high school students in Sandomierz had a slightly different opinion and chose the right to vote, international exchanges, and freedom of movement as the most important privileges.

Regarding the least important features, all groups agreed on data protection, the abolition of roaming charges as well as the right to petition. Furthermore, three groups discarded the European Citizens’ Initiative but did not specify why it was unimportant for them. Some students argued that the abolition of roaming charges is irrelevant since one could go abroad and buy a local SIM card. Indisputably, all four groups found it easier to agree on the most rather than the least important rights and privileges. In general, the groups mostly rated certain rights as unimportant, which they had never used or heard about being useful. Given these differences between all four groups, it does not seem that they are due to being different types of schools or regions.



## 5 The Right to Vote and EU Elections

The groups also discussed the reasons for the low turnout in EU elections. Overall, students in all schools agreed that ignorance regarding European politics was one of the main reasons. Moreover, they argued that the EU seems to be very distant while national issues are much more present in the media, more accessible, and thus perceived as more important for everyday events than EU issues. According to the students, the ignorance of many Polish citizens is accompanied by a lack of interest in the EU and a lack of willingness to partake in European elections. At the high school in Nowa Ruda, a student not only criticised but also explained the political passivity of Polish citizens regarding the EU elections. Not voting would be a more comfortable option than getting informed and becoming active.

In addition, students suggested that a degree of political disenchantment prevents people from casting their votes, as it prevents them from being disappointed. In Sandomierz, respondents from both schools considered a certain fear as a basic motive for not voting, suggesting that the anxiety of the consequences of a decision that people later would regret may play a role. In this regard, it was striking that most of the students differentiated themselves from the non-voters, saw non-voting as a missed opportunity, and stressed that it would make a difference if more people voted. A student from the high school in Nowa Ruda emphasised a generational difference in attitudes and the willingness to consciously participate in shaping one's own circumstances. In her view, more people will participate in future EP elections because young people are more conscious of making decisions and want to change something.

By contrast, some students from the schools in Sandomierz complained that especially young people in Poland are uninformed. Asked what the EU could do to get more people to vote in the EU elections, they expressed a desire to learn more about the EU and the elections. While to date, the information has often been targeted towards the older generations of their parents and grandparents, they would like to see a comprehensible information campaign enabling young people to also understand what is at stake. At the same time, they stressed that the right amount of information seems to be crucial, because a topic would quickly lose its appeal if it is "overused".

Overall, students in all groups expressed the desire for increased information campaigns for the EU elections, both in schools and the media. They suggested that media coverage of EU issues should be increased, people should be more actively informed, the benefits of EU membership should be highlighted, and public awareness of EU elections should be raised. At both high schools, some students admitted that they had never seen an advertisement or poster for the EP election. Some of the responsibility for the lack of information was placed at the national level. Students, for example, demanded that the Polish state should take care of more public relations and do more advertising for the EU candidates. A high school student from Nowa Ruda expressed concerns about the financing of the EU campaign, which could cause reluctance and skepticism among people. The group from the high school in Sandomierz, on the other hand, saw material incentives as an opportunity to motivate

more people to vote in EU elections. The group specifically discussed how the prospect of more funding could encourage people to cast their votes.

Furthermore, a student in Nowa Ruda (high school) expressed skepticism about whether the EU can do anything at all to motivate more people to vote, given the lack of openness and interest among citizens. In this context, the possibility of introducing compulsory voting was quickly discarded, as the freedom of choice is perceived as an important right.

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## 6 Conclusion and Expectations

What can the EU do to make students feel more like EU citizens? In summary, security on a personal, national, and economic level was a cross-cutting theme at all schools in the two Polish small towns: Students in Sandomierz argued that the EU could provide this security and thus also a sense of belonging through the mutual support of the EU countries regarding border protection or by introducing the Euro or a common EU holiday. Students in Nowa Ruda suggested the financial support of rural regions by the EU.

At the same time, students indicated that although the EU brings benefits both to Poland and to them personally, this does not necessarily influence the sense of community, as regional, historical, and cultural references often come first. However, some students expressed a desire to learn more about the EU and the elections. To date, the information has often been aimed at the older generations. Instead, they would like to see a comprehensible information campaign so that young people also understand what is at stake.

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# European Citizenship as an Invisible Anchor: Students' EU Perceptions in Rural Peripheral Areas of the Czech Republic

Mathilde Stangenberger and Hana Formánková

## 1 Introduction

At 53%, about half of Czech citizens have a positive image of the EU. This places the Czech Republic above the EU average. The image of the EU is even more favourable among younger people. Up to 82% of Czechs aged between 15 and 25 report having a positive image of the EU (ČTK 2022). On the other hand, only 8% of the Czech citizens say that their image of the EU has improved over the last year, whereas 28% report that it got worse. Furthermore, Czech citizens do not feel that their voices count. There is a tendency of 51% to disagree and of 10% to totally disagree with the statement that the Czech Republic's voice matters in the EU (European Parliament 2021).

In line with this negative perception of the input channels of the EU, the turnout in elections to the European Parliament has been repeatedly very low. Only around 28% in 2004, 2009, and 2019 and 18.20% in 2014 went to the ballot box. By contrast, turnout in national elections is higher and increased visibly in 2021.<sup>1</sup> The participation of young people aged between 18 and 34 was equally high, with 63% casting their vote (Prokop et al. 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Being around 65%, the parliamentary election in 2021 saw the highest participation since 1998. In this election, parts of Czech society mobilised and voted for the right-wing coalition "Spolu" against the populist party ANO. (see E15 2022).

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## 2 Towns, Schools, and Discussion Participants

Within the research programme of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence, group discussions with young people were conducted in the towns of Sokolov and Chrudim. Sokolov is located in the Karlovy Vary region in the west of the country, on the border with Germany. One of the most important industries is the *Uhelná* coal power plant. The town is well connected with the highway D6, which runs from the state border to Karlovy Vary. The E48 motorway connects it with Prague and Plzeň. The town has a clean centre with some houses in need of renovation, a few restaurants, pubs, stores and service shops on a small old market square with a church.

At 19.9%, voter turnout in the elections for the European Parliament in 2019 in Sokolov was lower than the national average (iROZHLAS 2022a). Looking at the parties that crossed the 5% threshold, 48.8% of voters cast their vote for parties that can be classified as pro-European (ANO, Piráti, STAN/TOP09), whereas 32.5% voted for some form of Eurosceptic party (SPD, ODS, KSČM).<sup>2</sup> In the elections for the Chamber of Deputies in 2021, 65.6% of the votes were cast for pro-European parties (ANO, Spolu, Piráti/STAN), and 14.2% for a Eurosceptic party (SPD) (iROZHLAS 2022c).

Chrudim is located inland in Eastern Bohemia, about 11 km south of the larger town of Pardubice. The whole Pardubice region, to which Chrudim belongs, is characterised by industries such as electrical and mechanical engineering, chemical production, manufacturing, the agricultural and food industries, as well as commercial and public services (Eures 2022a). Chrudim is connected to Pardubice by route I/37. It has a well-preserved and renovated town centre with several historic buildings and landmarks. In the elections for the European Parliament in 2019, the election results and turnout rates differed from the ones in Sokolov. The voter turnout was 29.4%, thus close to the national average (iROZHLAS 2022b). Looking at the parties that crossed the 5% threshold, 52.8% of voters cast their vote for a pro-European party (ANO, Piráti, STAN/TOP09, KDU-ČSL), whereas 33.0% voted for some form of Eurosceptic party (ODS, SPD, KSČM). In the elections for the Chamber of Deputies in 2021, 72.4% of voters cast their vote for pro-European parties (Spolu, ANO, Piráti/STAN) and 8.3% for a Eurosceptic party (SPD) (iROZHLAS 2022d).

In both towns, the group discussions were organised in one vocational school and one secondary school. The schools in Sokolov were easily accessible. The vocational school, *Integrovaná střední škola technická a ekonomická Sokolov*, is centrally located in a renovated building with a modern interior. It has 750 students and offers business-oriented subjects such as “economics and entrepreneurship” and “public administration” as well as “electrical engineering and computer science”.

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<sup>2</sup>For the EU positions of Czech parties, see Hloušek and Kaniok (2020) and Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2019). The classification of parties as being hard and soft Eurosceptic is based on Ray (2007).

The secondary school, *Gymnázium Sokolov*, is also easy to reach, lying close to the town centre in an open space with adjoining residential neighbourhoods. It is a building complex and gives the impression that it is well-kept.

The schools in Chrudim are located just outside the town centre, on a small hill. The vocational school, *Střední odborná škola a Střední odborné učiliště obchodu a služeb*, is housed in a well-preserved late Art Nouveau building, surrounded by a park with a fountain in front. It is modernly furnished and well-equipped (with beamers, whiteboards, etc.). Altogether, 480 students attend the school, which is specialised in the hotel business, gastronomy, and information technology. The secondary school, *Gymnázium Josefa Resslera*, is located nearby. The historic school building, surrounded by a park, is also well-preserved, modernly furnished, and well-equipped. About 500 students attend this school.

The group discussions took place immediately before the Chamber of Deputies elections on October 8 and 9, 2021, which needs to be taken into account when analysing the topics discussed. In each of the four schools, eight students (four male and four female) were randomly selected. All teachers were supportive throughout the organisation process but were not present during the discussions.

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### 3 The Situation of the Young People and Their Self-image as Citizens

To start the group discussions, students were asked to talk about the qualities and problems of their town and to explain who they thought was responsible for them. Across the different towns and school types, students mentioned public transportation as a problem. In their opinion, politicians at the local level are responsible for addressing these problems. Despite problems, they mostly wished to stay in the region or return later. Students talked about their EU citizenship in an abstract way and related it more to the collective state level. Nevertheless, they reflected through the discussion on the fact that they take their EU citizenship for granted. They then associated core values such as freedom of movement, peace, and security with it, and stated clearly that leaving the EU would have negative consequences. The Euro was a strong dividing topic.

Regarding their town, the students of the vocational school in Sokolov perceived drug addicts and homeless people as a problem.<sup>3</sup> Projects concerning the transportation infrastructure were irritating to them, and they saw the town government as being responsible for it. The students of the secondary school in Sokolov complained about the poor transport connections, e.g. to Prague, as well as the high

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<sup>3</sup>Social problems are discussed more in Sokolov, which might relate to the region's problematic past. Sokolov and the Karlovy Vary region are still affected by the deep structural and demographic changes following World War II, such as heavy industrialisation during socialism, the expulsion of the German-speaking population from Czechoslovakia and the re-settlement of these areas [for social problems see Formánková (2021)].

unemployment rate in the Karlovy Vary region (the highest in the Czech Republic).<sup>4</sup> They criticised the slow pace of the local politicians. The fact that there was no bookstore was given as a negative example. As possible future places to live, the students of both schools named the region itself, Plzeň, Prague, and foreign countries or foreign cities, e.g. Copenhagen.

In the Chrudim vocational school, many students came from small places around Chrudim or from Pardubice, the next largest town. Problems related to their villages and towns concern facilities, the landscape, and the education system. According to the students, envy and resentment prevail among citizens. By contrast, Chrudim was generally viewed positively (having a better infrastructure, being clean, and having enough shopping facilities and green areas). As in Sokolov, the students revealed that they see local politicians, more specifically the mayors, as responsible for the things not working. As possible future places of residence, they mentioned foreign countries (England, Germany, and outside of Europe). For the Chrudim secondary school students, the big problems were also the dysfunctional transport infrastructure and too many construction sites. Nevertheless, they recognised that the larger towns are very well connected to each other, e.g. Jihlava and Chrudim. The students not only saw the town but also included companies and the country as responsible for tackling regional problems. Many students wanted to stay in Pardubice or the region or go abroad (USA, Europe) and return to their families after a few years. Prague and Brno were also named as possible places to live.

Asked about their perceptions of their EU citizenship, the students of the vocational school in Sokolov talked about the EU in an abstract way. They positively mentioned the freedom of movement and emphasised that the member states do help each other. The EU's position on same-sex marriage, in contrast, was seen as negative, and the adoption of the Euro polarised the group. The students of the secondary school in Sokolov also mentioned the freedom of movement and the Schengen Agreement as something positive. Besides this, they explained that they see the benefits of the EU as something that can only be appreciated when it is no longer there. They found Brexit to be a negative example. The discussion furthermore revealed that they primarily perceive an economic and political connection to the EU, rather than a conscious personal connection. In general, the students stressed that they identify themselves as Czechs rather than Europeans.

When talking about their perception of their EU citizenship, the students of the Chrudim vocational school pointed out that EU topics are not discussed at school or with their parents. They repeatedly expressed the wish for more information and discussions on the EU. For them, the EU mainly stood for peace and security, and they said that countries would support each other in an emergency (e.g. a war). They therefore rejected a withdrawal from the EU and cited Brexit as a negative example. In a similar vein, the students of the Chrudim secondary school remarked that they take the EU for granted, but without the EU, there would be negative consequences. They positively mentioned the mutual security promises and peace, as well as the

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<sup>4</sup>Unemployment rate in Sokolov: 6.8%, 31 March 2021 (Eures [2022b](#)).

fact that there are no severe customs restrictions inside the EU. Similar to the secondary school in Sokolov, Brexit was perceived negatively, and the students had a polarising discussion on the Euro. The students saw the Czech Republic's relationship with the EU as a "give and take relationship". They reported that they felt like EU citizens, but that it would seem abstract and difficult to describe. Besides that, they viewed the EU as having a non-transparent environment.

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## 4 Perceptions of the EU and EU Rights

When asked to rank the policies and liberties provided by the EU, all four groups agreed that peace, the right to vote, and the right to healthcare are central (the latter possibly due to the Corona pandemic). This shows that the students regard the overall goals of the EU, its democratic features, as well as essential rights in certain policy areas, as very important. Besides this, three out of four groups additionally considered access to clean drinking water as a crucial feature.

Opinions were more heterogenous regarding the right to documents and consumer protection, which was ranked as central by some groups and considered something that could be discarded by others. Similarly, the freedom of movement was sustained as being central by two groups and as less important by the other two groups.

All four groups agreed that the absence of roaming charges is a right connected to the EU that could be discarded. The Erasmus exchange programme was discarded in three groups. As the group discussion in the secondary school in Sokolov revealed, this does not necessarily mean that students consider these rights useless but rather that they would find the restriction of these rights to be less drastic. An important criterion in the discussion was whether some rights are essential for survival or whether one could get by without them. Apart from the roaming charges and the Erasmus exchanges, there was no consensus among the groups as to which rights could be discarded. The students of the vocational school in Sokolov agreed that access to documents, Erasmus exchanges, and the right to have a European citizens' initiative/petition were the least important to them. The students of the secondary school chose the right to protest, data protection, and access to clean drinking water. Students of both schools agreed that access to an independent judiciary is a right they could do without. The results in Chrudim were equally diverse, with the vocational school students agreeing on data protection, access to documents, and non-discrimination, while the secondary school students agreed on consumer protection, the right to protest, EU funding for structurally weak regions, and reconstruction activities after the Corona pandemic.

The task of ranking EU and EU rights led to discussions that were very diverse in terms of subject matter, revealing that students in the rural areas of the Czech Republic have very different ideas about what the key achievements of the EU are. Among the students of the Sokolov vocational school, consumer protection was a polarising topic. Furthermore, they debated the importance of freedom of movement. Regarding EU subsidies, they criticised that they do not arrive in the region



anyway, which might be a reason why this right was not considered a central right by most groups. The discussion in the Sokolov secondary school revealed uncertainties regarding the meaning of some rights. Regarding clean drinking water, students were not sure whether the Czech Republic would have clean drinking water without the EU guaranteeing it. Moreover, there were questions about consumer protection, e.g. what it actually is and how the EU helps in this matter. Discussions in the Chrudim vocational school centered around the freedom of movement. The students hinted at the importance of free movement with regard to the coronavirus and how stuck and confined they felt not being able to move freely. They further discussed the right to protest, acknowledging the importance of protesting but refusing the violence that often comes along with it. The students in the Chrudim secondary school heatedly discussed, whether healthcare is too state-regulated in the Czech Republic and whether it should be more similar to the healthcare system in the USA. In some students' perceptions, doctors do not get enough recognition for their work in the Czech Republic compared to other countries like Germany.

In line with this, the answers to the question of what the EU should do to make students feel more like EU citizens differed considerably, and they also reflected more critical stances. Students of the Sokolov vocational school suggested exchange visits but saw the financial affordability as problematic. Moreover, they mentioned that the EU should address discrimination against LGBTQ people and that Czech MEPs should better represent the regions. Students in the Sokolov secondary school questioned whether one even wants to feel like a citizen of the EU. A student said that he is comfortable being Czech and does not need an emotional relationship with the EU. In general, longer EU membership was suggested as a condition for a stronger European identity. In the Chrudim vocational school, students revealed that they found it difficult to talk about the EU because the topic seemed abstract and they claimed to have too little knowledge about the EU. Some students in the Chrudim secondary school suggested that the Czech Republic should accept the Euro, which was followed by a heated debate. The students expressed their wish for more freedom, as the EU was seen as "dictating" from above. In addition, they called for a guarantee of democracy in the member states.

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## 5 The Right to Vote and EU Elections

The discussions about (non-)voting in the European Parliament elections revealed that the students overall considered it a missed opportunity when people do not cast their vote. Still, students of both schools in Chrudim argued that voting would be challenging for them as it would be difficult to decide which party would make their future better or worse and which candidate would support their interests. Besides this, some of the students revealed doubts about whether voting really matters. Students in the vocational school in Chrudim disagreed with each other about whether "every vote counts", and the secondary school students argued that voters' interests are disregarded, referring to political compromises at the national level.

Despite the above-mentioned difficulties and doubts, students of all but one group argued that non-voters should not complain about the EU.

As potential reasons for non-voting, the students discussed a lack of knowledge and awareness. The students of the Sokolov vocational school were at odds with the question of whether one vote can affect the outcomes of elections, even in the smallest percentages. Non-voters were described as lacking an opinion of their own. If the students had the chance to vote themselves, some said they would base their own political opinions on the views of their parents. Still, impartial teachers were important to them. Several students of the Sokolov secondary school reported that they had not known about the EU elections at all, and the students of the group agreed that young people are generally not interested in elections, which is also related to the fact that parties primarily support the interests of older generations. Besides this, they agreed that they see too little advertising for the EU elections and that misinformation and populism are problematic. Similarly, Chrudim secondary school students noted that people have little knowledge about elections and many ignore them. They criticised the absence of political education at school, saying that a voluntary interest in EU issues does not suffice for having profound knowledge about them.

Based on these considerations, the students suggested that voter turnout could be increased by providing more information about EU issues. This should be accomplished by schools, the media, and public campaigns or debates. The Sokolov vocational school students requested more informative campaigns and efforts to fight misinformation; they emphasised the role of the media and suggested more advertising for elections on TV, via Instagram, on the radio, or via Spotify. Instagram would be a good way to reach the younger generation, they remarked. The discussion among the Chrudim secondary school students also touched upon getting information about politics through the media, mainly through the influencers on YouTube. According to the students, most journalists write in an overly technical and inaccessible way, or topics are inflated, which obscures the facts. They therefore suggested that famous Czech people could act as “EU ambassadors”, who would inform the population and act as language mediators since English is not easily accessible but a lot of EU-related information is in English. Besides this, they suggested Instagram for election advertising.

The second important channel for EU-related information mentioned by students was schools. In Chrudim, the students of the secondary school remarked that political topics were not sufficiently addressed at school, while the students of the vocational school said that it would be important to stir an interest in the EU at a young age and to promote political education at schools more. Also, in the Sokolov secondary school, the students addressed the topic of political education in schools, as well as the question of whether a teacher should express a political opinion and pass it on. They particularly expressed the wish for more education on European law, the tasks of an MEP, and EU elections.

In addition, the students of the Sokolov secondary school suggested to increase voter turnout with larger campaigns and motivations to vote, but they also noted that it is more rewarding for parties to spend money on campaigns for national elections

than for EU elections. Students of the Chrudim secondary school demanded more comprehensible public discussions about the EU elections. To them, the EU seemed complicated and inaccessible, and they said that they would like to see more transparency on the influence of the elections on them as individuals.

Last but not least, when talking about increasing voter turnout, the students of both schools in Sokolov and the Chrudim vocational school suggested material incentives. They jokingly mentioned doughnuts, shoes and iPhones as a type of motivation, ironically referring to the 2013 election campaign of the Czech entrepreneur and billionaire Andrej Babiš and his populist political party ANO, during which Babiš was handing out doughnuts to people in the streets. Although these were not serious suggestions, they showed that students do follow and critically reflect on political events at the national level.

In sum, the students considered the lack of information about EU-related issues to be the central obstacle to a higher voter turnout in the elections to the European Parliament. Most of their suggestions, therefore, aimed at providing information on complex EU issues via different channels and in a form also suitable for young audiences.

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## 6 Conclusion

The students viewed the social and infrastructural problems as the pressing issues of their towns and villages and gave responsibility for them mostly to the local politicians. Despite obvious problems, they mostly envisaged staying in their region or going abroad and returning later.

While students were eager to discuss their EU citizenship, they struggled to find a direct link between EU citizenship and their everyday reality. Nevertheless, the discussions revealed that they related it to such core values as freedom of movement or peace and security. These values were often considered an absolute natural part of their lives and, hence, personally important, although the students do not practice them or reflect on them consciously in their everyday lives. This was underpinned by a resolute rejection of leaving the EU, often referring to the negative example of Brexit.

When asked to rank EU rights and achievements, peace, the right to vote, health care, and clean water were the top priorities for all students. Compared with these “more existential rights”, the freedom of movement was considered less important by students in two groups, thus suggesting that they were not aware of the protection of these existential rights through the EU.

Talking about the elections to the European Parliament, the students criticised the lack of factual information about European politics, a fact-bound public discussion, and an absence of discussion about the EU at schools, and signaled that they wished to discuss more about the EU.

Overall, the findings suggest that EU citizenship is reminiscent of an anchor in the daily lives of the students. It is associated with core values and gives stability but is

largely invisible and taken for granted by young people in the peripheral areas of the Czech Republic.

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# Between Support and Mere Coexistence: Diverging Perspectives on the EU from Slovak Students in Peripheral Towns

Mathilde Stangenberger

## 1 Introduction

In Slovakia, negative attitudes towards the EU prevail. According to the Eurobarometer Spring 2021 survey, 52% of the Slovak people have a fairly negative or a very negative image of the EU, whereas 44% have a very positive or fairly positive image (European Parliament 2021). Despite the predominantly negative attitudes, the majority of Slovaks voted for pro-European parties in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament. Of all the voters, 41.1% cast their ballot for a pro-European party (PS + SPOLU, SMER-SD, OĽaNO), 19.3% cast their vote for a soft Eurosceptic party opposing the EU in one or more policy areas (KDH, SaS) and 12.1% for a hard Eurosceptic party generally opposing the EU (ĽSNS, see European Parliament 2019a).<sup>1</sup> The remaining 27.5% were cast for parties that did not cross the 5% threshold.

While voter turnout in the elections to the European Parliament is very low in Slovakia, it increased between 2014 and 2019 from 13.1 to 22.7 % (ibid.). Furthermore, the participation of young people aged between 18 and 24 increased from 6% to 11%, but still, Slovakia shows the lowest voter turnout out of all EU member states (EACEA 2022; European Parliament 2019b).

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<sup>1</sup>For the EU positions of Slovak parties, see Rybář (2020) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey of 2019. The classification of parties as being hard and soft Eurosceptic is based on Ray (2007).

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## 2 Towns, Schools, and Discussion Participants

Within the research programme of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence, group discussions were conducted in four schools in the three Slovak towns of Ružomberok, Liptovský Mikuláš, and Lučenec in September 2021.

Ružomberok, with its 27,000 inhabitants, is located in the northwest of Slovakia. The city is easily accessible by car within the country. It has an old town centre and otherwise rather socialist-style architecture. The two largest employers in the region are the Military Hospital and the Mondi SCP paper factory. The 26% voter turnout in the 2019 European Parliament election in Ružomberok was slightly above the Slovakian average (ŠÚSR 2019a). In the territorial district of Ružomberok (which includes the nearby villages), 33.1% voted for a pro-European party (SMER-SD, PS + SPOLU, OĽaNO), 30.7% for a soft Eurosceptic (KDH, SaS) one, and 14.9% for a hard Eurosceptic party (ĽSNS, ŠÚSR 2019b). In the 2020 elections to the National Council, 49.7% voted for a pro-European party (OĽaNO, SMER-SD, Za ľudí<sup>2</sup>), 14.6% for a soft Eurosceptic (Sme Rodina, SaS) one, and 9.8% for a hard Eurosceptic party in this district (ĽSNS, ŠÚSR 2020a). The vocational school in Ružomberok, *Spojená škola—Stredná odborná škola obchodu a služieb Ružomberok*, is centrally located in the town in an older, non-renovated building. About 320 students attended the school. It has a hotel academy, and subjects offered at the school include management in regional tourism and marketing.

Liptovský Mikuláš is located about 30 km east of Ružomberok, with about 31,000 inhabitants. In the well-kept centre, there are several restaurants and sights with residential areas surrounding the centre. The town has experienced a tourism boom in recent years. In the 2019 European Parliament election, voter turnout in Liptovský Mikuláš was at 24.6%, thus slightly above the national average (ŠÚSR 2019d). In Liptovský Mikuláš (territorial district), 46.7% voted for a pro-European party (PS + SPOLU, SMER-SD, OĽaNO), 18.3% for a soft Eurosceptic (SaS, KDH) one and 12.6% for a hard Eurosceptic party (ĽSNS, ŠÚSR 2019c). In the 2020 elections to the National Council, 49.5% voted for a pro-European party (OĽaNO, SMER-SD, Za ľudí), 16.9% for a soft Eurosceptic (Sme Rodina, SaS) one, and 9.3% for a hard Eurosceptic party (ĽSNS, ŠÚSR 2020b). The secondary school in Liptovský Mikuláš, *Gymnázium M. M. Hodžu*, is situated not far from the town centre. The large old school building appeared to be well-maintained. Approximately 400 students attend the school.

Lučenec, a town with about 28,000 inhabitants, is located in the south of Slovakia, close to the Hungarian border. Architecturally, the city centre is very heterogenous. Some of the streets and buildings are in poor condition, especially outside the city centre. In the 2019 European Parliament election, less than every fifth citizen of the town cast his/her vote, and the turnout was at 18.2% (ŠÚSR 2019e). In the territorial district of Lučenec, 37.2% voted for a pro-European party (SMER-SD, PS + SPOLU, OĽaNO), 7.1% for a soft Eurosceptic (SaS) one, and

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<sup>2</sup>For the EU position of this party, see Za ľudí (2022).

13.0% for a hard Eurosceptic party (ĽSNS, see ŠÚSR 2019f). Apart from the parties that crossed the 5% threshold, more than one-fifth of the votes were cast for the parties of the Hungarian minority, SMK-MKP (11.6%), and Most-Híd (10.6%), who later merged together with MKÖ-MKS into Szövetség/Aliancia in 2021 (ibid., TA3 2021). In the 2020 elections to the National Council, 46.7% voted for a pro-European party (OĽaNO, SMER-SD, Za ľudí), 12.5% for a soft Eurosceptic (Sme Rodina, SaS) one, and 8.9% for a hard Eurosceptic party (ĽSNS, see ŠÚSR 2020c). The vocational school in Lučenec, *Stredná odborná škola hotelových služieb a dopravy v Lučenci*, is located in an industrial area surrounded by barrack-like buildings. The school is in an outdated condition. There is a hotel academy, and subjects such as marketing, computer science, agribusiness, mechanics, and electrical engineering are offered. It is a bilingual school with many students having a Hungarian background. The secondary school in Lučenec, *Gymnázium Boženy Slančíkovej Timravy*, is located just outside the centre. The school building is in average condition. About 420 students attend the school.

In all group discussions in Ružomberok, Liptovský Mikuláš, and Lučenec, eight randomly selected students took part, four of them male, four female, except for the Lučenec secondary school, where seven students participated and three had to leave during the discussion. All teachers were supportive throughout the organisation process. They were not present during the discussions.

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### 3 The Situation of the Young People and Their Self-image as Citizens

To start the group discussions, students were asked to describe the problems and qualities of their town, to identify who is responsible for them, and to explain where they would like to live in 10 years. One aspect that prevailed among all school types was that the responsibilities were seen mostly on a local level but also on a national scale. Regarding future places of living, there was no clear tendency towards staying in the region, in Slovakia, or going abroad. Students often named the Czech Republic as a place where they saw themselves and used the neighbouring country as a comparative example for the quality of life in Slovakia. Public transport was seen as a problem by some but not all of the students. One aspect that was perceived as a problem was the segregation of the Roma and non-Roma populations, as well as the conflicts that arise between the majority population and minorities. What was discussed very differently in the groups was the question of a shared mentality and value system among the EU member states.

Students of the vocational school in Ružomberok revealed quite negative views concerning their town. They named Milan Fil'o, one of the richest Slovaks and the owner of the paper company Mondi SCP and the football club MFK Ružomberok, as responsible for many local problems, as well as the mayors and the national government. The town itself was described as “backward” due to its poor air quality, bad state of construction, and the rural depopulation in the region. The students also discussed Ružomberok in relation to its neighbouring town, Liptovský Mikuláš,



which they perceived as being in a better economic position. They positively mentioned Ružomberok's good infrastructural connection within Slovakia and to the neighbouring countries, as well as the mountains close by. In general, the students described financial uncertainty in Slovakia and viewed the Czech Republic as a country in which the quality of life is higher.

In the secondary school in Liptovský Mikuláš, some students viewed the Roma population in their places of residence as a problem and also expressed prejudices towards them. They perceived the Roma population as living untidily and being dirty and accused them of contributing to the bad cityscape. The students saw that responsibility for local problems lay mainly with the mayors and the local government. Furthermore, they talked about censorship in the local media towards critical reports on local politics.

The students in the vocational school in Lučenec and the region perceived bad waste management, vandalism, brothels, drugs, and thievery as the main problems. They furthermore described the growing number of LGBTQ+ people in the region as something negative. Regarding their daily needs, the students considered Lučenec to provide a good infrastructure and mentioned that this does not seem to be the case in the surrounding towns, especially regarding health care. Students perceived racism and anti-Romani sentiment as a problem not only in the region but also in the school, e.g. coming from the teachers. One student described a clear spatial division between the Roma and the non-Roma population in her town, which would amplify a mutual dismissal among both groups. The students in the Lučenec secondary school saw the high unemployment rate and conflicts between the Hungarian minority, Slovaks, and Roma as problems. Some of them articulated prejudices and revealed racist attitudes toward the Roma, which were countered by other students and sparked a discussion in the group. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ people was also seen as a problem by a part of the group.

Regarding their perception of EU citizenship, the students from the Ružomberok vocational school perceived tourism and the freedom of movement as unifying elements in the EU and named Brexit as a negative example. The students pointed out that the states help each other and that Slovakia could not sustain itself on its own. EU citizenship was seen as something positive, especially in terms of educational opportunities at home and abroad. They also felt that there was a similar mentality among the EU countries. As positive aspects of the EU, the students of the secondary school in Liptovský Mikuláš mentioned the freedom of movement and trade, a sense of belonging among the member states, as well as the fact that the "stronger" member states help the "weaker" ones. For the students, the EU has opened many new opportunities. In addition, they viewed the adoption of the Euro, the EU's efforts in environmental protection, and the work against discrimination very positively. The students reported that they feel connected to the EU through a sense of belonging and a shared value system.

Talking about EU citizenship, the students from the Lučenec vocational school perceived EU membership as a given and named the freedom of movement as a unifying aspect. The member states were seen as a "family" that is helping each other in times of crisis. The students named projects in education like Erasmus+ as

important opportunities. Yet, they said they are too young to compare the time of Slovak EU membership with the time of its non-membership. The Euro as a common currency was a polarising topic. Similar to the students in Ružomberok, students in the vocational school in Lučenec perceived the Czech Republic as better off after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Students from the secondary school in Lučenec argued that the cultures among the EU member states are too different to be united. They saw the EU as a system of coexistence in which the emphasis lies on the individual state and its actions. As a follow-up to the discussion on racism, one student articulated that she perceived racism as a huge problem in the EU and stated that racism and homophobia would be what unites the European member states. In all four groups, no one had heard of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

To make them feel more like EU citizens, the students from the Ružomberok vocational school mentioned that they would like to see young people's opinions taken more seriously. EU subsidies should be invested more in rural areas. The students said that they hardly ever talk about the EU. The students from the Liptovský Mikuláš secondary school demanded that political education and EU topics should be more prominent in schools. They wished for financial project support on a more accessible level. In addition, they mentioned dialogue formats in schools and with older people and demanded that EU-funded projects be made visible beyond the region in which they were implemented. From the students' perspective, a lot of projects take place in Bratislava and go unnoticed in the more rural regions of Slovakia. At the end of the discussion, several students articulated that even talking about the EU topic throughout the course of the group discussion had already made them feel more connected to the EU and their rights as citizens.

Discussions in the two schools in Lučenec focused on different issues. For the students of the vocational school in Lučenec, the EU should pay further attention to poorer countries and provide more free education and financial support for educational institutions. Underpinning this demand, the students described their school as the most neglected in Lučenec. Besides this, they reported that doctor's visits cost them money and expressed the wish for free healthcare. In the view of the students, the EU should inform people more about its projects, e.g. Erasmus+. Moreover, it should care more about the Roma and other minorities in the region who experience discrimination. By contrast, the students from the secondary school in Lučenec saw the national rather than the European level as responsible for the changes needed to solve the problems they perceive. They did, for instance, suggest lowering taxes.

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## **4 Perceptions of the EU and EU Rights**

When asked to rank EU achievements and rights connected to EU citizenship, all four groups agreed that peace is an important feature of the EU. Students in three of the four groups also agreed that the right to vote is a central right. The freedom of movement was seen as an important aspect in three groups, except for the students in the Lučenec vocational school, who discarded it. Apart from that, the groups considered very different rights essential. The students of the Ružomberok

vocational school viewed the right to healthcare and access to clean drinking water as very important. In the Liptovský Mikuláš secondary school, the students considered EU funding for structurally weak regions, reconstruction after the Corona pandemic, and access to an independent judiciary very important. Similarly, the students of the Lučenec vocational school regarded the right to healthcare, EU funding for structurally weak regions and reconstruction after Corona, as well as access to clean drinking water, as very important. The students of the secondary school in Lučenec were the only group that chose consumer protection as a very important EU citizenship right. Furthermore, they viewed access to clean drinking water and the right to healthcare as essential. It is interesting to note that EU funding for structurally weak regions and reconstruction after the Corona pandemic was put into very different categories in the two schools in Lučenec. As mentioned, for the students of the vocational school, it was one of the most important aspects, whereas the students in the secondary school discarded it.

By contrast, there seemed to be a stronger consensus among the students with regard to the question of which rights could be discarded. They all agreed on the absence of roaming charges and the Erasmus program. Three out of four groups also mentioned the right to protest, which is a fundamental right but yet something they could easily live without. This was explained differently in all three groups, but similarly, students in the Ružomberok vocational school and the Liptovský Mikuláš secondary school said that in their perception, the right to protest is at times being misused or abused. The students in these two groups further stated that citizens could just wait for the next election to come around and voice their opinions that way instead of protesting. The students of the Lučenec vocational school argued that the right to protest would be less important because the European citizens' initiative would also allow for a form of protest. Apart from the absence of roaming charges and Erasmus exchanges, access to documents was also discarded by two groups and categorised as less important in the secondary school and the Lučenec vocational school.

In general, the task of ranking EU achievements and rights connected to EU citizenship stirred up different debates among the groups. The students at the Ružomberok vocational school mainly discussed their understanding of racism and discrimination, and concluded that their definitions of where discrimination and racism begin are very different. In Liptovský Mikuláš, the discussion revealed that the deciding factor for students when ranking EU citizenship rights was whether something was considered essential for survival. In both schools in Lučenec, the process of ranking EU citizenship rights was very quick, and there was almost no discussion. Even though the students of the vocational school named the freedom of movement as something uniting in the EU and discrimination as a huge problem in the first part of the group discussion, they discarded the freedom of movement and not being discriminated against because they did not seem essential to them compared to other rights. In the Lučenec secondary school, the students pointed out the discrepancy between formally claiming non-discrimination and acting according to this claim, which is not always a given in their perception.

## 5 The Right to Vote and EU Elections

Talking about the right to vote and whether non-voting is a missed chance, the students reported that they see several problems as reasons for the very low turnout in the elections to the European Parliament.

According to the students, one important factor is the feeling of a lack of representation. The students of three groups—the vocational school in Ružomberok, the secondary school in Liptovský Mikuláš, and the vocational school in Lučenec—pointed out that people do not see themselves represented by the candidates they can vote for, and that the candidates for the EP elections seem far away from the electorate, which would be the reason why many citizens do not voice their opinion in elections. Moreover, the students in Ružomberok, Liptovský Mikuláš, and the Lučenec secondary school pointed out that there is too little information about EP elections and the EU in general, which they perceive as another important factor as to why only few people in Slovakia vote.

Apart from these two aspects, the groups raised various other points. The students in Ružomberok revealed that they see elections mainly as a matter of money. Voters, in their perception, vote primarily for the least of all evils. At the same time, they argued that people who do not vote are missing an opportunity. The students in Liptovský Mikuláš stated that the low voter turnout is used by more extreme parties to their advantage, and the discussion showed that they had polarising opinions on whether the European Parliament is more important than the national parliament. In the vocational school in Lučenec, students said that the youth feel like their vote does not matter, and they stated that, on a national level, politicians would be lying a lot. In the secondary school in Lučenec, the students felt too young to change anything about political issues because they could not vote yet.

When asked how to increase voter turnout, the students of the schools in Ružomberok and Liptovský Mikuláš similarly emphasised the importance of adequate representation and information. From the Ružomberok students' point of view, a better choice of candidates would motivate more people to vote. In addition, they argued that people should be more informed about why the European Parliament elections should be important to them. In the students' perception, politicians mainly use their voters because they want to accumulate money themselves. The students in Liptovský Mikuláš suggested that the EU should promote the elections better, e.g. via social networks, which are used more by young people, or via TV, for older voters. In addition, the candidates should be more visible in the campaigns. In schools, political education about the EU should be strengthened, too, by the EU itself.

In both schools in Lučenec, the students suggested incentives to get people to vote. Students of the vocational school said that the EU should motivate and interest people to go to the elections and suggest material motivations like money or gifts, even though this was also seen critically as making a bribe among the group. The students of the secondary school also mentioned material voting incentives. This was countered with the argument that people would then go out and just vote for anyone,

only to receive the bonus. Furthermore, the students pointed out that people need to feel affected by the elections and their outcome.

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## 6 Conclusion

In the discussions, the students in three groups mentioned a shared value system or a similar mentality within the EU as a unifying factor, whereas the fourth group perceived the EU states as living more in a system of coexistence. Young people in peripheral regions of Slovakia, therefore, seem to have different perceptions of the EU. Some students reflected that they hardly talk about the EU in their daily lives but found it more interesting the longer they participated in the discussions. Apart from the benefits that the students saw for Slovakia as a country, on a personal level, they mentioned the freedom of movement and educational opportunities provided by the EU as being important to them. To feel more like EU citizens, they suggested that EU topics should be more prominent in schools and further wished for financial project support on a more accessible level.

Peace was central to all groups, as were the right to vote and the freedom of movement in three out of four groups. It was interesting to observe that the right to protest was discarded in three of them. This was justified by saying that people could wait for the next elections to voice their protest or start a petition, which indicates that the students perceive these rights as balancing each other out.

One recurring aspect in the discussions was the reference to the Czech Republic. Due to their shared history, the Czech Republic was perceived as being close to Slovakia, but was described by several groups as offering better living standards after the dissolution. Furthermore, living together with ethnic minorities and discrimination against them were very present topics, especially in Lučenec.

Looking at the right to vote and the low voter turnout for EP elections in Slovakia, the students described a lack of representation and lack of information or misinformation on the elections as the main problems. Following these issues, they suggested a better choice and the higher visibility of candidates, material voting incentives, and more information on why these elections should matter to people in Slovakia.

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# An EU Providing Freedom of Movement, Health Security and Financial Support: Students' EU Perceptions in Two of Hungary's Peripheral Towns

Nora Mandru and Dorottya Víg

## 1 Introduction

Attitudes towards the EU are fairly positive in Hungary. In 2022, 47% of Hungarian citizens claimed to hold a positive image of the EU (as compared to the EU average of 44%). The Hungarians' attachment to the EU reported by the Eurobarometer (70%) is higher than the EU average (58%) and places Hungary among the countries with the highest attachment levels. However, participation in European Parliament elections is somewhat lower than the EU average. Besides this, the partly EU-sceptic FIDESZ-KDNP won an absolute majority of votes in the 2019 EU elections, while the explicitly pro-EU parties only secured 37.4% in total<sup>1</sup> [see p. 159, 257 in European Commission (2022b) and European Parliament (2022)].

Young people aged between 15 and 24 view the EU more positively, are more optimistic about the Union's future, and display significantly higher trust levels than the Hungarian average [see pp. 7, 22 in European Commission (2022a)]. At the same time, according to a study conducted by a government-friendly think tank, almost half of first-time voters voted for FIDESZ-KDNP in the 2022 parliamentary elections (MCC 2022).<sup>2</sup>

The 43.4% participation in the 2019 European Parliament elections was somewhat lower than the EU average (50.66%) (European Parliament 2022). In contrast,

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<sup>1</sup>The formerly far-right and anti-EU party Jobbik has shifted towards a more-pro European position since the 2014 parliamentary elections and won 6.3% of the votes, while the only party that outright rejects the EU (Mi Hazánk) reached 3.3% and therefore did not gain a seat in the European Parliament (European Parliament 2022).

<sup>2</sup>While this figure needs to be interpreted with caution because the institute that generated it cannot be considered independent, it does hint towards a considerable proportion of FIDESZ-KDNP voters among young people.

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turnout for the 2022 national elections stood at 69.5% (Election Guide 2022). Young Hungarians also have been found to lack political engagement, which is in accordance with broader regional trends [see p. 19 in Oross et al. (2018)]. As per a 2020 poll among Hungarian youth, only 17% of respondents reported being strongly interested in politics, while 38% were not very much interested or not at all. In addition, 31% of respondents claimed they had not taken part in any political or civic activity (including voting in elections) in the previous 2 years [see p. 5 in NDI & Political Capital (2020)].

The present report summarises the findings of four group discussions conducted among students in two Hungarian peripheral towns. Participants agreed on the importance of freedom of movement, the EU-wide right to healthcare, and a financial redistribution within the EU. With regard to the other policies, each group established its own priorities.

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## 2 Towns, Schools, and Discussion Participants

The group discussions with Hungarian students took place in Siófok in the southern Transdanubian region and in Karcag in the northern Great Plain. Siófok has 24,968 inhabitants and Karcag 19,353 (Belügyminisztérium 2022). The two towns vary considerably in terms of their economic profiles and cityscapes. Differences between vocational and secondary schools were evident in both cities, with secondary school students having more prior knowledge and being slightly more engaged in the discussions.

In contrast to the peripheral character of its near surroundings, Siófok is the largest town around Lake Balaton and a popular (domestic) tourist destination, making it one of Hungary's wealthiest towns. However, out of season, the city centre is deserted, and shops and restaurants around the holiday villas on the waterfront are closed, while only a few stores in the town centre and near the train station are open. The residents live on the outskirts in condominiums and prefabricated flats. They typically travel within town by local bus, car, or bicycle. In the 2022 parliamentary elections, the FIDESZ-KDNP candidate won nearly 60% of the Siófok votes, followed by the opposition coalition candidate with 35.8%. The turnout was 67%, which is slightly below the national average (NVI 2022). In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the turnout (47.9%) was higher than the national average, and FIDESZ-KDNP received 52.5% of the votes, followed by the pro-EU, social-liberal DK with 19% and Momentum with 9.4%. The other parties gained weak support (NVI 2019b).

In contrast to Siófok, the town of Karcag is not a very popular tourist destination and mainly active in natural gas production and agriculture. The town hall, court, police station, post offices, and schools are located in the small city centre, which is very green with many parks and some playgrounds. It is surrounded by condominiums and prefabricated buildings, while the suburbs are marked by single-storey houses with large courtyards. There are many shops in the town, but few hotels, restaurants, bars, and cultural facilities. The roads are in a very bad

condition. Local transportation is provided by bus, but many people also ride bicycles or walk. The train station is a 25 min walk from the centre, and the city is easily accessible by train from Budapest. In the 2022 parliamentary elections, the FIDESZ-KDNP candidate won 64% of the votes while the united opposition's candidate received 29.2%. Turnout stood at 60.7%, below the national average (69.6%) (NVI 2022). In the 2019 EP elections, the FIDESZ-KDNP candidate won 64.4% of the votes, Jobbik 11%, and DK 9.6%, and turnout (41.74%) was slightly lower than the national average (43.6%) (NVI 2019a).

The group discussions took place at a secondary and a vocational school in both cities, respectively. In Siófok, one class from the Krúdy Gyula vocational school and one from the Perczel Mór secondary school participated. While the former school is located on the outskirts of town in a 1970s building typical of Hungary, the latter is in the city centre in a building renovated in a somewhat more modern way. Both are easily accessible by bus and on foot. The Krúdy school has 712 students in 26 classes, who can choose from various professions such as baker, commercial salesman, logistics or economic technician, financial-accounting administrator, baker-confectioner, cook, and catering waiter. The Perczel Mór secondary school has 565 students in 17 classes and offers extra lessons in English and German, as well as a humanities and science class. In both schools, the group discussions were held in separate classrooms. In both cases, as always, there were eight participants, randomly selected but ensuring gender parity. The teachers were supportive, and they did not attend the discussions. Overall, students were not overly interested and had little prior knowledge about the EU, so the conversation was rather slow, but there were two to three students in the secondary school who were particularly active.

The group discussions in Karcag took place at Nagykun Református secondary school and Varró István vocational school, which are located in the city centre. The secondary school is in an old, renovated building with spacious classrooms, while the vocational school is housed in a socialist building similar to the one in Siófok. Nagykun School has 267 enrolled students and offers extra lessons in foreign languages, the humanities, and science. No teacher was present during the group discussion, but the head of class encouraged students to participate and to be active. The vocational school has 270 students, who can choose from professions such as nurse, social worker, cook, carpenter, bricklayer, financial and accounting administrator, and locksmith. The teachers were helpful, encouraging the students, who at first did not want to participate in the discussion. Despite this, most of the students did not actively participate, many of them answered the questions with difficulty or gave answers that had already been given. Compared to the students of the Karcag secondary school, it seemed that they had only limited knowledge about the EU, its institutions, principles, and rights.

### **3 The Situation of the Young People and Their Self-image as Citizens**

Typical narratives of the students in the discussions were that their respective towns were not very vibrant, that there were few (job) opportunities, and that they would leave for a different city or abroad in the future due to these problems or for university studies. The narratives regarding EU citizenship were more diverse and opinions less fixed. The vast majority of the students from both towns answered that they had not heard of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Students at the Siófok vocational school hoped for a qualified job in logistics or another economic sector. Moving to Budapest or foreign countries, mostly Austria, as favourite destinations, was a prevalent plan. The secondary school students who envisaged visiting university imagined living in Budapest or abroad in 10 years' time. Students of both types of school considered Siófok a nice town, but they deplored that it was overcrowded by tourists in summer and deserted in winter, with few leisure facilities and poor public transport and road conditions.

Most Karcag vocational students wanted to work in their profession (nurse/hospital worker) after graduation and imagined themselves in another Hungarian city or abroad. For secondary school students, the main narrative was to live in a big Hungarian city or abroad where they could attend university and later earn larger salaries. Like the vocational students, they reported that the city had developed recently, offering many parks and possible activities in summer, but that there were still few opportunities, especially in terms of leisure activities, schooling for young people, and community life in winter. The poor quality of roads and dangerous pedestrian traffic were also mentioned.

When asked what it meant for them to be EU citizens and what linked them to other people living in the EU, the Karcag vocational students first mentioned the financial support that comes with EU membership and the developments that have been made thanks to it. They also talked about the Schengen area and its benefits, the common currency, and the right to healthcare in all Member States as a way of bringing people in the EU together. Most students of the Karcag secondary school also felt that the Schengen area made it easier for them to meet friends and relatives living abroad, and in this sense, the EU connects them most with people in other countries. Some said that the EU's financial support allowed less developed countries to catch up with more developed ones, thus connecting them. Others stated that the introduction of the Euro in all Member States would better connect EU citizens.

Students from Siófok vocational school only highlighted the ease of travelling and moving within the EU, while some Siófok secondary school students thought that Hungary's EU membership was barely noticeable. They held this view because Hungary had not introduced the Euro and they had little contact with people from other Member States. As in the Karcag secondary school, the free movement of people was mentioned by most secondary students in Siófok as a reason for being linked to other EU citizens, especially family members or friends. Overall, most participants felt like EU citizens mainly because of the free movement of people and

the ease of crossing borders. While some of the students in Karcag felt that EU citizenship definitely had an impact on their lives, some of the students in Siófok claimed the opposite.

When asked what the EU could do to make them feel more like EU citizens, students suggested that taking part in exchange programs or travelling, the introduction of the Euro, an EU-wide minimum wage, or more space for European issues in school curricula could contribute to their sentiment about EU citizenship.

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## 4 Perceptions of the EU and EU Rights

When asked to rank the policies and freedoms provided by the EU, a number of similar narratives were apparent concerning the most and least important issues, while the opinions were more heterogenous regarding some particular rights and freedoms.

All four groups agreed that the EU-wide right to healthcare was one of the EU's most crucial offerings. Other concepts that were mentioned at least twice were financial support to weak regions in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, consumer protection, the free movement of people, the right to clean drinking water, and peace. Concerning the EU-wide right to healthcare, students recounted vacations abroad during which they required medical services. Although it only appeared in the "Top 5" of one school, non-discrimination was discussed in three out of four discussions, and while some students agreed that it was non-essential, other participants pointed to racism and homophobia in Hungarian society and implicitly referred to the government's anti-LGBTQ policies when explaining why they deemed non-discrimination a crucial right.

Regarding the least important features, three out of four groups decided that Erasmus+, the European Citizens' Initiative, access to documents, and the abolition of roaming charges could be discarded.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Erasmus+, many pupils were unaware of the exchange opportunities for high school students and apprentices. They claimed that the program had "nothing to do with them" and asserted that there were alternative ways for people to work or study abroad (Siófok secondary and Karcag vocational school). Regarding the roaming charges, students from the Siófok secondary school argued that they were more relevant for regular travellers. In general, it was frequently asserted that a nation state should supply services like clean water, data, or consumer protection on its own rather than relying on the EU.

Some rights and freedoms were considered very important by some groups but less so by others. While non-discrimination was placed in the "Top 5" by the group from the Karcag vocational school, it was deemed irrelevant by the students from the Karcag secondary school and the Siófok vocational school. Problems with racial

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<sup>3</sup>Especially the decision regarding Erasmus+ and the abolition of roaming charges might come as a surprise since these policies are very tangible, and especially young people benefit from them directly.

discrimination in Hungary were mentioned repeatedly. Students from the Karcag vocational school voiced concerns about discrimination based on sexual orientation and implicitly referred to the FIDESZ-KDNP government's crackdown on the LGBTQI community. On the other hand, the students from the Karcag secondary school stated that the fight against discrimination was each individual's responsibility and therefore not connected to the EU.

When discussing the rights and freedoms connected to EU citizenship, some concepts first needed clarification in vocational schools, whereas the discussions in the secondary schools were somewhat more informed and reflective. Examples of terms recurrently requiring elucidation were the independence of the judiciary and the European Citizen's Initiative. In addition, students were often unaware of the impact the EU has on certain policy areas. For example, the Siófok vocational students at first were not aware of the exact benefits entailed by European Health Insurance. Thus, it sometimes became evident from their argumentation that students were not equipped to make informed decisions on certain topics.

The FIDESZ-KDNP government's policies were only mentioned seldomly and implicitly: twice in relation to LGBTQI rights and once in relation to the independence of the judiciary. Given Hungary's polarised political climate and media scene, this is startling. Regarding several of the discussed issues (i.e. the judiciary, non-discrimination), there are profound conflicts and even legal quarrels between the government, on the one side, and the opposition, international observers, and the EU institutions, on the other. The fact that these matters were barely mentioned during the discussions—neither in a critical nor in an appreciative way—may suggest that the students are somewhat uninformed about or uninterested in (EU) politics.

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## 5 The Right to Vote and EU Elections

When asked whether they considered it important (e.g. an “opportunity”) to partake in the European Parliament elections, students overall agreed on the importance of voting in order to ensure representation, make one's voice heard, and influence the political decisionmaking processes. They also stressed the EU's impact on Hungarian daily life and the resulting need for the representation of national interests at a European level. At the same time, they emphasised that national elections were more important than EU ones. Students frequently accentuated that single individuals might not feel that their vote counts, but that it is the overall number of votes that makes the difference. Finally, students stated that people who were uninterested in and uninformed about politics were unlikely to vote because they did not care about the elections and did not understand the potential consequences of their vote. Some students added that these individuals, in fact, should not vote and stressed the importance of making informed decisions in order to ensure competent political representation. While there were no clear differences in the answers attributable to the respective types of schools, vocational students seemed to be slightly more

sceptical regarding the importance of the EP elections and the impact of one's individual vote.

Students across geographical locations and types of schools agreed that awareness for the EP elections needed to be raised, and they mentioned several possible ways to achieve this end. Students argued that traditional offline advertising techniques like posters and leaflets were essential. An additional focus was put on social media: numerous students suggested that influencers on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram could play a vital role in promoting the European elections. Students also mentioned television advertising and election information as a possible strategies. In this regard, they also referred to the uneven coverage of national and EP elections in the (government-affiliated) public media, demanding that the latter be required to cover EP elections as extensively as national ones. Participants widely agreed that more information on the elections needed to be disseminated and that this information needed to be substantial and grounded. As a possible remedy for the low turnout, they proposed school workshops and events, as well as a greater emphasis on how the EU functions in school curricula. Students argued that many young voters needed to be informed about the value of their votes, especially if it was their first opportunity to cast one. Young people were considered a vital voting base since the students expected them to shape the future of the European project.

Most participants in the group discussions agreed on the importance of raising awareness about the elections and informing voters about them. Several students suggested incentivising the voting process monetarily, but such suggestions were also problematised with reference to the risks of manipulation and fraud. In addition, some Karcag vocational students proposed introducing compulsory voting. However, this idea caused immediate criticism as some students were convinced that it would spark protest and outrage and ultimately discourage individuals from voting.

Although the general points were similar, the discussions' emphasis was somewhat different: students from the Siófok secondary school focused mostly on raising awareness and providing information. Students in the Siófok vocational school seemed to be less enthusiastic about voting in general. In Karcag, the students from the secondary school had a quite extensive discussion on the importance of addressing young people, as well as the prospects for fostering turnout via not only social but also public media. The students in the Karcag vocational school mainly discussed whether compulsory voting would be desirable.

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## 6 Conclusion

While Hungarian citizens display greater levels of trust in the EU and a more favourable perception of the Union than the EU average, sizable portions of the public support FIDESZ-KDNP, a coalition that frequently uses nationalist and EU-critical language. The same seems true for this particular group of young people. Studies have also revealed that many of them are disengaged and fairly uninterested in politics.

The present report reveals that living in peripheral areas can come with distinct experiences and challenges. The economic profile and cityscape of the two towns where the group discussions took place vary considerably. However, the narratives in the discussions do partly overlap. Moreover, there were differences between the discussions in vocational and secondary schools in both cities, with secondary students having more prior knowledge and being slightly more engaged in the discussions.

All groups agreed on the importance of the right to healthcare—a fact which might have been accelerated by the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Besides, many of them stressed the importance of freedom of movement and financial redistribution within the EU. Students needed explanations for several of the EU's rights and freedoms because they did not seem to fully grasp the scope of the former, which made it difficult for them to decide on their priorities. The FIDESZ-KDNP government's policies were hardly mentioned, even if they are openly in conflict with EU jurisdiction (for example, on matters such as non-discrimination or the independence of the judiciary). In a highly polarised political climate, this could indicate that the students were either underinformed or uninterested in (EU) politics.

Students overall agreed on the importance of voting and raising awareness for national and especially European elections. They stressed the significance of social media for motivating young people to cast their vote.

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# Low Attachment to an EU that Is Associated with Mobility. Students' EU Perceptions in Two Romanian Peripheral Towns

Andreea Ferenczi and Cornel Micu

## 1 Introduction

Romania became a member of the EU, together with Bulgaria, in 2007, after long and complicated negotiations. The accession met practically no political opposition. Fifteen years after the accession, the image of the EU continued to remain positive and above the EU average, with 54% of the Romanians trusting the EU and 47% having a positive image of it (see pp. 10–12 in European Commission 2022a). Nevertheless, there is a clear decline in the positive perception of the EU when compared to 2007, when trust in the EU was as high as 68% among Romanians (see p. 36 in European Commission 2007). The turnout at the European elections in 2019 was slightly higher than the EU average (51.2% vs. 50.7%).

Young people between fifteen and twenty-four represent around 11% of the total population of Romania. There are ministries dedicated to them, such as the Ministry of Youth and Sports or, since January 2022, the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Equal Opportunities, and there was a national strategy regarding youth policy in place between 2015 and 2020. Yet, the Romanian state did not develop action plans or allocate budgets for youth policies, meaning that most of the youth policy remained on paper (European Commission 2022b). The younger part of Romanian society shows a lower interest in European elections, with a turnout of 43.2% in 2019 (see p. 3 in Consiliul Tineretului din România 2019). In the 2020 national parliamentary elections, turnout was only 25.9% (Consiliul Tineretului din România 2020). With regard to the political preferences of the youngsters, studies show that they are the main force behind the right-wing Alliance for the Unity of All

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Romanians, with 36% of the electorate between eighteen and thirty voting for them in 2020, way above the average country level of 9% (Sclavone 2022).

Emigration is a particular problem in Romania, affecting young people indirectly. The number of Romanians residing abroad was estimated at 3.6 million as of 2015/2016, representing around 17% of the total population, with 90% of them being of working age (OECD, 2019). Many high school pupils have parents or relatives working abroad. In rare cases, some of them lived and studied abroad for extensive periods of time before returning to Romania and reinserting themselves in the national education system.

Another peculiarity of Romania is the high share of people living in rural areas. With roughly 46% (Institutul Național de Statistică 2011), Romania has the highest share of rural population among the EU states. This is associated with strong socioeconomic disparities between the predominantly urban regions (such as the cities of Bucharest or Cluj) and the more rural ones. These differences affect the quality of education, the poverty level, and the tendency to immigrate in different areas of Romania.

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## 2 The Background: Towns, Schools, and Students

Group discussions were conducted in high schools in Moreni, a town situated in Dâmbovița county in the Wallachia region, and in Caransebeș, a town in Caraș-Severin county, in Banat. While similar in size (18,000 vs. 21,000 inhabitants), the two towns are in fact very different.

Moreni is an old industrial town. Until 1990, it was known for its oil extraction activity, having been an important centre since the beginning of the twentieth century. At present, the oil industry has lost its importance and is only a small branch of activity for the inhabitants. While public transport is lacking, there is an inter-county road network that connects the town with the rest of the localities and one gas station where people can refuel their cars. The town lacks significant historical buildings associated with the urban areas. In the centre, there are a small number of restaurants and cafes. The only tourist attractions are the churches Schimbarea la față (1868) and Adormirea Maicii Domnului (1891–1895) in the Stavropoleos district. There are several supermarkets belonging to well-known national chains and a central market often used by citizens. Other points of interest and entertainment for the inhabitants are a tattoo studio, several beauty salons, the “Flacăra” Stadium (currently closed), and sports betting centres. Like in well-developed rural areas, citizens generally live in individual homes. The number of blocks of flats is small, and they are generally only four storeys high, having been built during the communist period. The two high schools where we conducted the group discussions are located at the centre of four boulevards.

During the parliamentary elections in December 2020, the turnout in Moreni was 29.8%. The Social Democrat Party (PSD) gained 35.44% of the votes, followed by the National Liberal Party (PNL) with 19.77%, the pro-European Union Coalition of *Save Romania Union* and *Party of Liberty, Unity, and Solidarity* (USR-PLUS) with

13.12%, and the *Pro Romania Party* (PRP), which did not manage to pass the electoral threshold at the national level, with 9.35% (Code for Romania 2020). In 2019, at the European Parliamentary Elections, the results were: PNL - 24.61%, PSD - 23.74%, and URS - 21.84% (Code for Romania 2019b).

In contrast to Moreni, Caransebeş is a medieval town with architecture specific to the area, being an urban gathering place designed around the Orthodox Cathedral *Învierea Domnului*. During the communist period, the town was hastily industrialised, with an emphasis on car construction. After the 1990s, local industry developed by the communist regime largely disappeared. Currently, there exists only one medium-sized factory, TMD Friction Romania, which produces brake pads. In general, the inhabitants are engaged in relatively modest economic activities, with most of them working in public institutions, providing services, or being involved in trade. The town centre has a promenade area, and the adjoining buildings are in a good condition. The locality is compact, the streets are laid out on the banks of the *Timiș River*. The architecture of the town is a testament to its old membership in the Habsburg Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire, with buildings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also Art-Nouveau buildings from the beginning of the twentieth century. The town centre has remained predominantly historic in character. However, there are also buildings built during the communist period, with four floors. Dwellings are generally in good condition, they are normal and small in size. The town is well developed in terms of its infrastructure, and it is connected to the national railway network and important national roads, which facilitate transport between Caransebeş and major towns in the area, but also with rising tourist areas such as *Muntele Mic*.

During the national elections of December 6, 2020, most of the inhabitants voted in favor of PSD – 33.19%, followed by PNL with 27.59%, USR with 11.78%, and the right-wing AUR with 10.29%. Turnout reached 24.5% (Code for Romania 2020). The 2019 European Parliamentary Elections were won by PNL with a 36.2%, followed by PSD with 20.2%, PRP with 14.2%, and pro-European USR with 13.98%, with a total turnout of 41.1% (Code for Romania 2019a).

In the case of Moreni, the selected high schools are the only ones there are: the technological “oil” high-school<sup>1</sup> and the national college “Ion Luca Caragiale”.<sup>2</sup> They are located very close to each other (roughly 500 meters), in grey, anonymous buildings with functional architecture. The number of students is higher for the theoretical high school (650) than for the technological school (453). The group discussions took place in the classrooms of 11th grade students with a technological specialisation (the protection of the environment) at the “oil” lyceum and a theoretical one (computer science) at the “Ion Luca Caragiale”. In both cases, the teacher was present. In the case of the technological high school, she tended to interfere in the discussions, even suggesting answers. The students at this high school were generally less communicative than their counterparts.

<sup>1</sup>For more information, see <http://gsip.xhost.ro/>.

<sup>2</sup>For more information, see <http://cncaragialemoreni.ro/>.

In Caransebeş, we managed to gain access to two of the four high schools: the “Traian Doda” national college and the “Decebal” technological high school. Unlike in Moreni, the two high schools were very different. The “Traian Doda” national college was established in 1880 and functions in a historical building placed in the centre of the town. The “Decebal” technological high school, established in 1973, functions in an industrial-looking building located on the periphery.<sup>3</sup> As in the case of Moreni, the number of students enlisted at the theoretical school (146) is significantly higher at the technological high school (192). The 11th grade students participating in the group discussions had a theoretical specialisation in computer science at the “Traian Doda” college and a technological one in mechanics at “Decebal”. In both cases, the discussions took place without any teacher being present.

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### 3 Young People and their Self-Image

There were noticeable differences regarding the projections of their future among the students at the theoretical and technological high schools. The first students expressed the desire to leave their birth towns and study at prestigious Romanian universities (Bucharest for Moreni and Timișoara for Caransebeş), with a significant number of them searching for an education abroad. The second group of students did not really have any future plans, not even to work in their technological study fields. They seemed to regard high school education merely as a way of gaining a diploma. Those desiring to study abroad and eventually to live there mentioned the larger wages, but also the possibility of better developing their professional skills.

All of them complained about the life in a small town, without any possibilities to enjoy themselves and with few prospects for reasonably paid jobs. Some of them declared that they travelled to larger cities in search of fun whenever they had the opportunity. Although both towns had mountain regions nearby, most of the discussants agreed that they do not go hiking and rather prefer to have fun in the towns.

The level of knowledge regarding EU policies was low, and none of the students had heard about the Conference on the Future of Europe. They complained about the lack of information regarding the EU, since there was neither an information office in their towns nor specific classes to teach them about it. The group discussions showed that the “theoretical” and “technological” students relate themselves differently to the European Union. The former have more theoretical knowledge regarding the EU, which they acquired mostly by themselves from the internet. The latter had direct knowledge, gained from visiting their emigrated relatives and, in at least one case in Caransebeş, from living and studying in an EU country for a long period of time together with the emigrated family.

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<sup>3</sup>For more information, see <http://cntd.ro/oferta-scolara-2021-2022-colegiul-national-traian-doda-caransebes/> and <https://sites.google.com/ltdecebalcaransebes.ro/decebal/home>.

Two aspects of the EU were mentioned by all pupils: the funds provided for the development of their regions and the liberty to freely travel in Western countries. In the first case, they accused directly, at least in the case of Moreni Technological High School, local politicians of stealing EU money, while the teacher, who was present during the discussions, tried to change the subject. In the second case, most of them defined the EU as a representative of Western countries, seen as desirable targets for travel and work.

All four groups mentioned feeling a certain distress regarding the EU, in that it could erase their identity, but gave no clear examples in this regard. The students of technological schools, especially the ones who had lived abroad together with their families, were most vocal and revealed instances in which they were discriminated against. Nevertheless, they were also the most vocal critics of Romania, citing the corruption and indifference of local politicians, the difficulty in finding jobs, and the generally poor living conditions. During the group discussion at the theoretical school in Moreni, they mentioned the cleavage between Eastern and Western Europe, mentioning some kind of Eastern identity.

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#### **4 Perception of the EU and EU Rights and Achievements**

Initially, the students were reluctant to discuss EU issues. They did not have much knowledge about the European Union, only a few general references. However, they were interested in ranking the rights, freedoms, and notions connected to EU citizenship. They collaborated well and justified their choices, showing an interest in seeing what their rights were.

In all four groups, we observed a number of clear similarities in terms of establishing the most important rights. All agreed that the right to peace and justice are important pillars for the proper functioning of a modern society. Their interest was closely linked to the conflict in Ukraine. However, the group discussions revealed that the students did not know exactly what role the European Union plays in ensuring peace and justice.

Another right that the majority considered important is the right to health insurance within the European Union. The interest in health insurance comes against the background of the international social situation, deeply marked by the SARS-Covid pandemics. To this, one may add the problems of the Romanian health care system, plagued by corruption, and unequal access to treatment.

As for the least important rights, three out of four groups decided that a single currency could be abandoned, as could the rules on common internet access. In the two high schools in Caransebeş, students rated the rights governing telephony and roaming charges as less important.

The rights, freedoms, and notions of EU citizenship were initially seen by students as abstract and hardly applicable to them personally. They said that they felt more Romanian than European and that they did not really feel close to European values and symbols. Some students, especially from technical high schools, reported that they felt different from the rest of Europeans. This did not prevent them from

expressing an interest in the professional development opportunities offered in the European area. They expressed vocal interest in learning more about the possibility of emigrating and about the Erasmus+ programme, about which they had only general information.

In the “Ioan Luca Caragiale” National High School in Moreni, some of the students who took part in the discussions had been involved in the Erasmus+ programme and studied for a period of time in countries such as Spain and Greece. Although they have been part of this project, they did not know everything it includes and which targeted categories and groups could benefit from Erasmus+. Among the students in this high school, there was a considerable part that saw the European Union as a real opportunity for professional development.

The discussions on EU competencies and citizens’ rights revealed that among the topics less known by the young people were the functioning of the European Parliament, the election procedures, and the European Citizens’ Initiative. In addition, students were not fully aware of the real impact of each right and how it can impact their daily lives.

For this reason, some decisions during the discussion were made by intuition and based on preconceived notions. In the technological high schools of Moreni and Caransebeş, students looked at rights in a more practical, instinctive way, based on their personal experiences. One of the pupils involved lived for several years in Spain with his parents, who had gone to work there. He felt unwelcome and faced discrimination. His experience was perceived by his peers as the norm for Romanians working in the European Union. All these preconceptions certainly influenced the way young people related to the European Union.

The theoretical high school students were more reflective and more careful in weighing decisions, maybe due to a higher level of knowledge on politics. However, it also seemed that the composition of the local population influenced their perceptions. For example, it was more difficult for the pupils in the “Traian Doda” National College in Caransebeş to agree on the most important/unimportant rights, because they had conflicting opinions. It should be noted that the students in Caransebeş are part of an ethnically and religiously diverse environment with a considerable ethnic Hungarian and German community. The right to the protection of minorities was debated in depth by the students of this high school, who decided in a group vote that this right is not important. However, the decision was made in particular in relation to sexual minorities.

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## **5 Voting Right and EU Elections**

In general, the students were not very interested in the right to vote, and it was not one of the topics they spoke about easily. They did not have the necessary information to express a concrete opinion. They were not sure how the election process works, how candidates are chosen, or what their functions are. They felt closer to local or national elections, which they consider more important and more relevant to their daily lives.

However, some of the students (namely, the two groups of students in Caransebeş) considered the right to vote essential and extremely important in a democratic system, where citizens' voices must be heard and represented at the highest level. Beyond this awareness, albeit at a theoretical level, there were also groups of students, such as those from the technological high school in Moreni, who considered the right to vote unimportant. They argued that a simple vote cannot change anything and that politicians in key positions do not fulfil their roles. Moreover, they blamed politicians' carelessness and corruption as the main reasons why they are not interested in elections. Obviously, this attitude was influenced by the context of young people's experiences with and information about national and local elections in Romania. More specifically, they related to the EU elections through the information and stereotypes they already had assimilated with regard to the national election.

Although the students of the "Oil" Technological High School in Moreni could give up the right to vote, they could not give up the right to protest, which was ranked among the most important rights. The young people in question were not interested in expressing their wishes and ideological beliefs through direct voting, but they are ready to make their voices heard by protesting. At the opposite end of the spectrum are both groups of students in Caransebeş, who ranked the right to protest as one of the most unimportant rights.

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## 6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the young people who participated in the group discussions in Romania viewed the debated issues in broadly the same way. Although the economic, cultural, and social profiles of the two towns are different, the way pupils related to the EU did not vary considerably. In both towns, we observed differences between students in theoretical and technical high schools with regard to the way they perceive themselves as part of the European Union. Students in the technical high schools had a more direct experience with the EU. While they felt discriminated against or knew Romanians who felt discriminated against in other member countries, they did not consider that the defence of minority rights should be a priority on the political agenda. Students in theoretical high schools had a much better and more complex picture of what the European Union represents and who they are as individuals in the European space.

In conclusion, the pupils felt little attachment to European values, not considering themselves part of the "European family". They identified primarily with their national identity and found it difficult to relate fully to the European identity. Some of them felt that this was due to the notable differences between Romania and the rest of the EU member states. Young people perceive socio-economic differences between Romania and other member states, which amplifies the feeling of incongruity.

Moreover, students felt that they were not well informed about the European Union. They expressed an interest in learning more about EU rights and freedoms

and noted the lack of information about this subject. Young people claimed that they hardly receive any information about the European Union in school and even less about their rights. The majority said that they would be more involved if they had access to more official information in an organised way, as they had not thought to inform themselves until there was a group discussion.

Students in both towns concluded that a clear, organised, and effective communication strategy is needed to increase the sense of EU citizenship. It is worth mentioning that there were voices among the students, such as a student from “Ioan Luca Caragiale” National High School, who pointed out that he wants elements of Romanian identity and culture to be protected and even enhanced in the European context.

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## Part II

# Practices of EU Citizenship. Evidence from Erasmus+ Projects Promoting EU Citizenship within the Framework of the EU Youth Dialogue



# How to Make Projects to Enhance Youth Participation Successful. A Comparative Analysis of Six Youth Dialogue Projects

Christoph Kirtzel and Astrid Lorenz 

## 1 Introduction

Citizens of the member states of the European Union enjoy the rights and achievements provided both by their own home country and by the EU. What sounds good in theory is, however, not without problems in practice. On the one hand, there is a lack of participation. On average, only half of all EU citizens participate in European Parliament elections. In the post-socialist countries, political participation is even less widespread. The electoral turnout is significantly lower than the EU average (see p. 26 in Solijonov 2016), and there are high levels of distrust in politics, especially when it comes to EU issues. On the other hand, there is a lack of representation. Young EU citizens' needs and views mostly play a subordinate role in the EU, as critics contend. This is partly attributed to the fact that young people are simply outnumbered and partly to the myopic tendencies inherent in democratic systems (cf. Jacobs 2011; MacKenzie 2016; Smith 2021). Critics argue that as a result, not enough attention is paid to important issues such as climate change, which will massively affect young people in particular.

However, the EU is aware of these problems around citizenship and has, for example, declared the year 2022 as the European Year of Youth (European Youth Portal 2022). It also regularly organises or funds projects to encourage people to become more involved in European civil society. This chapter discusses how to make such projects successful. It identifies the factors that organisers of such projects perceive as stimulating and is thus intended to help other project organisers to choose the right approach for own projects. It relies mainly on interviews with practitioners responsible for six Erasmus+ projects within the framework of the EU Youth Dialogue that targeted young people in different rural regions with a socialist

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past.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted within the framework of the Leipzig Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence between May and July 2022. The study treats the interviewees as experts in their field who often have long experience with such projects, and thus are able to identify success factors and challenges.

The chapter is organised as follows: The next section outlines the subject of interest and the methodology in greater detail. Afterwards, we examine dialogue projects in terms of success factors for participation and empowerment. In the fourth section, we further discuss the findings and compare the suggestions made by the project practitioners with the criteria that the EU applies for selecting projects for funding. The chapter concludes with a short summary and suggestions for further research.

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## 2 Successfully Enhancing Youth Participation: Approach and Methodology

In the context of our project, participation means political and social participation, especially in making one's voice heard in matters that are directly related to one's own social group. Political participation usually involves taking part in elections or active party membership, thus actions intended and able to influence the formation of the public will, political decision-making or the implementation of public matters. Social participation is realised through access to public life and being organised (formally or informally) in groups to represent one's own interests. To delineate participation from other forms of public involvement, Nanz and Fritsche (2012, p. 13) exclude "information events with a participatory touch or procedures involving interest groups, lobbyists, or professional experts", as well as "plan interpretations to which citizens, associations, and authorities can submit comments, objections, concerns, or suggestions" (own translation).

EU youth dialogue projects do not aim to directly influence EU (or national) politics. Instead, they intend to enhance the ability to do so. In other words, they are "activities outside formal education and training that encourage, foster, and facilitate young people's participation in Europe's democratic life at local, regional, national, and European level" (European Commission 2022). "Supported activities should help the participants strengthen their personal, social, citizenship, and digital competences and become active European citizens." They shall, for example, "provide young people with opportunities to engage and learn to participate in civic society"; "raise young people's awareness about European common values and fundamental rights and contribute to the European integration process, including through contribution to the achievement of one or more of the EU Youth Goals" or

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<sup>1</sup>A transnational research project on Participation and citizenship education and learning in European Youth Programmes applied a similar approach with case studies of six youth dialogue projects (and other projects) (Fennes and Gadinger 2021).

“bring together young people and decision makers at local, regional, national, and transnational level” (ibid.).

The European Commission, when deciding upon applications for funding, measures the potential success of a project based on a set of “award criteria”. They include how much the projects fit the programme’s aims, but also how inclusive they are for young people from different backgrounds, to what extent young people are involved in all phases of the activities or how appropriate the measures aimed at disseminating the outcomes of the project within and outside the participating organisations, are, to name but a few (ibid.).

This conception of success is a particular one, based on the rationale of the EU and its approach to public funding. This is reflected, inter alia, by the fact that the organisation of partisan political events, the statutory meetings of organisations, or the networks of organisations may not be supported although they are, from a purely academic point of view, important arenas of participation (e.g. Armingeon 2006; Badescu and Neller 2006). Another example of the particularity of the approach is that the physical infrastructure is not funded and that funding is limited to a maximum of 24 months, although many practitioners and experts in the field of informal education argue that sustainable measures to enhance participation need a certain infrastructure and permanent networks and organisational structures (e.g. Kleist and Weiberg 2022; Alke 2015; p. 223 in Möller 2014).

To use a particular definition of success to derive eligibility criteria is legitimate. Academic approaches to capture successful participation do also vary significantly, depending on the disciplinary interests. Political science analyses, for example, are often based on ideas concerning democracy and legitimacy. Varying normative assumptions about a ‘good democracy’ then imply varying models of “good citizens” participation (see p. 146 in Mayne and Geißel 2018), resulting in different ideas on how youth projects could best enhance “good participation”. While according to liberal approaches (e.g. Easton 1979; Schumpeter 1942), the projects should primarily increase young people’s ability to identify their interests and to promote them, if necessary, via the established channels of representative electoral democracy, this would not be the case for models of participatory democracy (Barber 2003; Bobbio and Bellamy 1987), which require a much higher degree and different forms of participation. For them, successful projects to enhance participation would need to increase the intellectual and rhetorical capacities of young people and their inclination to participate in a maximum of processes at a local, national, and European level. Citizens’ participation with a high legitimacy would also require high efficacy, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and an openness to the procedures of participation (see p.7 in Schmidt 2013). Thus, one can expect that with different conceptions of successful participation, the conceptions of factors guaranteeing the success of a project aimed at enhancing participation also vary.

In our research, we were interested in what the project *organisers themselves* identified as factors for successfully conducting youth projects to enhance participation and EU citizenship. As experts in their field, they are familiar with the intricacies, i.e. the challenges, the framework conditions, and the practices of

EU-related participatory youth projects. Research on such projects thus depends on their expertise. To learn from their expertise, we conducted qualitative interviews. Interviewing experts and practitioners is a common instrument to gather data in fields where participatory observation would run the risk of influencing the observation and where questionnaires would not leave enough room for exploration. When interpreting the interviews, however, one needs to keep in mind that they do not guarantee a completely neutral observation and evaluation of the projects. Practitioners, while valued as experts, may have vested interests, like legitimising and securing their own work. They also might have internalised the criteria that the EU, as the main funder, uses to evaluate youth projects (consciously or unconsciously), or they might follow their implicit personal ideas of what makes projects successful instead of observing and evaluating their work on an objective basis. At the same time, interviews with project organisers are the best instrument available for systematically collecting the extensive knowledge of the experts.

Pooling perceptions and experiences from experts working on *different* projects operating with *different* methods is a suitable approach to analysing success factors in the field of youth participation if the projects and their context conditions are not too distinct. A similar approach was, for example, used by Schelbe et al. (2015) or by Kränzl-Nagl and Zartler (2010). In our case, the selected projects share important features (dealing with EU issues, targeting youth living at least partly in rural areas of post-socialist regions). To keep a linkage to the EU's own approach, we decided to choose youth dialogue projects which had successfully undergone EU checks and were accepted for funding in 2019.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in a sense, they fall within the spectrum of cases that in the view of the EU are potentially successful projects and do not represent the whole universe of theoretically possible youth projects. As metropolitan regions often have a very strong influence on EU policies anyway, we deliberately chose locations far away from metropolitan centres. Since the number of such youth dialogue projects in our main region of interest (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania) was very limited at least in 2019 and two project organisations did not respond to our invitation for an interview<sup>3</sup>, we decided to include projects from Latvia and Eastern Germany in our sample, which are also post-socialist areas and share typical context conditions.

The interviews were conducted online and individually with representatives from each project organisation. In several cases, they were no longer active in the organisation and thus do not represent the organisation's interests officially. The interviews were semi-structured with a number of questions concerning the projects' success and other issues, which were put flexibly according to the answers of the interviewees. The interviews started with a part in which the interviewees spoke

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<sup>2</sup>The aim was to analyse projects which were finished before the analysis but not temporarily too far away.

<sup>3</sup>“Let's get together for youth”, a project conducted in Žiar nad Hronom (Slovakia) by ZAŽIAR, and “Congress Planet of Youth”, a project conducted by the association Dumni z Polski in Żarki (Poland).

**Table 1** Mentioned success factors for youth dialogue projects

Kielce, Poland (Chap. 11)	Flexibility, networking, expertise, involving the target group, a mixture of practical local and more complex European issues, transnational perspectives, and resources for different activities
Mińsk Mazowiecki, Poland (Chap. 12)	Active inclusion of teenagers in the planning phase, trained and experienced organisational staff, connecting with other organisations in the same field, the visibility of consequences, aiming for realistic goals
Nation-wide events in the Czech Republic & Slovakia (Chap. 13)	Clear focus on a particular target group, experienced staff, established network, combining EU politics with local issues or a local perspective, transnational cooperation
Orosháza and Szarvas, Hungary (Chap. 14)	Supporting young people's self-efficacy, establishing clear accountability, involving the participants, focus on the target group and its living conditions
Latvia with international elements abroad (Chap. 15)	Proper funding, giving young people the possibility to gain international experience, dealing with local issues with the EU in mind, experienced staff, involving young people but with some sort of guidance
Rural areas in Eastern Germany (Chap. 16)	Strong partnerships between the project and the target institutions, involvement of young people, connecting practical local and complex European issues, accountability

Source: own summary, based on Chaps. 11–16 in this volume

about themselves and the organisation, then covered practical questions regarding the projects, and ended with a reflection part inviting the interviewees to speak about success factors and challenges. The interviews were conducted in English by two interviewers each, documented, and transcribed. Based on the interviews and additional research, detailed project reports were prepared (see Chaps. 11–16).

An analysis of the success factors presented in the next section was conducted inductively with categories emerging during the analysis process. Besides, the order of the analysis reflects the relevance that the interviewees themselves gave to the different issues.

### 3 Key Factors for Successful Youth Participation

Table 1 summarises the success factors mentioned by the interviewees. The left column indicates the youth dialogue project for which the interviewee was part of the organisation team. The right column contains what the interviewees mentioned as being important for the success of the project.

Although the examined projects differed regarding contents, method and place, the project organisers mentioned overlapping sets of success factors. First and foremost, the tailoring of the dialogue projects for the target audience was highlighted in all six cases. This was perceived as crucial for keeping the

participants' motivation to engage at a high level. It can be achieved by involving young people in the project work, as most interviewees said. Showing the participants that their voice is heard by inviting local decision makers is a way most, but not all, project organisers took advantage of. Connecting the European and the national or regional levels, supporting a transnational perspective, and working in an organisation team with experienced staff were important factors for the success of some of the projects too. Less often mentioned factors were being part of an established network and the creation of an empowering discussion environment.

Some of these success factors have a general character and seem to be valid for different kinds of project work, like aligning topics and methods with a target audience or working in an experienced organisation team. Other factors are rather specific to these kinds of youth projects, like linking the European to the local level. In the following, we summarise how the project organisers have outlined the factors. We start with the success factors that most of them mentioned and continue with those that were mentioned less often.

### 3.1 Adapting Methods and Topics to a Respective Target Group

All project organisers argued that it is necessary to tailor the covered topics and the methodological framework to a targeted audience. For example, the German project focused on young teenagers that were 13 years old or older. The organisers argued that it would have been difficult to confront the young participants with sophisticated knowledge of institutions and policy making in the EU. Therefore, they promoted issues that may be the most relevant for their age level. In order to give them a better idea of the EU's importance for their own living environment, the project took advantage of gamification strategies. Tools for everyday use were playfully connected to European politics. Similarly, the interviewee for the Hungarian project (*un)Attractive? II* stated that participation projects should deal primarily with young people's living environment and values to arouse interest in European topics.

The Latvian project organiser of *The Best Is Yet to Come* stressed the fact that not only the participants' age but the experience of the young people with political processes should be considered. Even though the numbers are not large, there are young people already involved in rural development or volunteering for other political purposes. These people often have extensive knowledge about EU institutions or political decision making. Projects like the *Decide on Europe* project from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, which addressed secondary school students, had to find a compromise between the different levels of experience of the students involved in the project. According to the project organisers, the increasing diversity of participants makes it more difficult to create a format that is appealing to everyone. Nevertheless, customising the methods and treated issues of a dialogue project plays an important role in the planning stage and seems to be a crucial factor for the success of a dialogue project.



### 3.2 Involving the Participants in Organisational Issues

According to several project organisers, it is not easy to find relevant topics that match the needs of the young people, especially when the organisers are much older than the young participants. Therefore, another often-mentioned success factor for youth dialogue projects is the serious involvement of the target group before, during, and after the participation process. This ensures that the focus on the target group, as expressed above, can be fully realised, and does not remain a meaningless phrase. For the Polish organisers of the *European Youth Week* and the *Mińsk Youth Forum*, this meant to organise the dialogue in such a way that almost the entire project is from young people for young people. If good supervision is guaranteed, interviewees argued, young people will handle even demanding tasks like budgeting in a responsible way. Not only does the dialogue project benefit from their commitment, but the young people themselves get the opportunity to achieve new skills and knowledge while taking part in the planning phase. It is important to give them confidence and trust so they can develop a sense of responsibility on their own.

The organisers of the Latvian project stressed that the involvement of young people in all stages of the organisational process requires guidance from experienced colleagues who are willing to share their knowledge. In the Hungarian and East-German cases, the young participants were not involved in the earlier stages of the process but played a role in the evaluation afterwards. Nevertheless, their experiences with the benefits of involving the (former) participants are similar. The German project organisers mentioned that young people should not be confronted with too many involvement possibilities as there are some participants who, depending on their age and workload in school, could be overwhelmed (cf. *Unstable Motivation of Young People* in Chap. 10). Still one can easily see great commonalities across the projects when it comes to the positive aspects of integrating young people into the project work.

### 3.3 Making the Voice of the Youth Be Heard

To achieve a discussion where all dialogue partners are willing to play an active role, it is necessary to encourage them to share their opinions. Therefore, besides involving participants early in the planning process and thus making the project for them as interesting as possible, it is important to show that the voice of the participants is also heard outside the organised project discussions. Due to the lack of institutional structures which channel the concerns of young people directly into political processes, most of the examined projects integrated dialogues with local decision makers into the project itself to ensure that the views of the young people find their way into the political sphere. Participants were intended to feel heard when talking to officials who were honestly interested in their viewpoints.

Our interviewees from projects like *Decide on Europe* and *Mińsk Youth Forum* reported that the participants felt encouraged when they spoke to decision makers because they had the impression that their voices counted. The interviewees argued

that for young people, elected officials often feel to be out of reach. They are convinced that dialogue projects have the potential to change that by bringing officials and young people together. Positive experiences were made, especially when local politicians were invited. They are responsible most directly for the living conditions of the young people and share the same regional background. Thus, there are no or low cultural or language barriers that could hinder profound debates.

However, involving politicians is not always possible or useful. The organisers of the Hungarian project did not include meetings with politicians but instead tried to focus on enabling an open exchange of opinions without any hierarchy in the discussion. Especially in Hungary, where there is great skepticism among politicians towards EU politics, this was the main concern. In the German case, the dialogue project included dialogues with decision makers, but the interviewees pointed out that the participants did not feel heard by them. According to their observations, the politicians tended to answer valid questions vaguely and evasively, which further enhanced an already existing distrust in politicians (cf. *Missing Framework for Consequences of Youth Dialogue Participation* in Chap. 10 in this volume).

### 3.4 Linkages Between the European and the Local Level

According to the interviewed project organisers, another parameter particularly important for dialogue projects regarding EU citizenship in rural areas is an emphasis on the connection between the European and the local level. Even though some of the portrayed projects had a transnational approach, they all tried to make linkages between the national and EU levels visible. This was made in different forms.

The Czech and Slovakian *Decide on Europe* project focused on local topics and connected them to EU topics later to “offer an added value”. To show that the EU is not far from one’s personal life but has an impact on everybody in Europe, regional issues were seen as a good starting point and to move on from there to the European level. The Polish *European Youth Week* had a similar approach. The organisers emphasised that there are greater possibilities for young people when they can shape their actual environment (e.g. with their claims about a local night bus) instead of discussing European issues on a theoretical basis. The latter could demotivate young participants. The German project used a game to promote the learning process about linkages between European and everyday issues. The Polish *Youth Forum* also dealt with local topics while highlighting the connection to EU values like equality, diversity, and democracy—values that are also important in local policy making. At best, the EU can appear as an ally for young people when their concerns are not heard in national politics. With this respect, the interviewee related to the Polish government’s way of dealing with climate change.

Lastly, the project organisers explicitly considered it as an advantage to invite local decision makers to EU-related projects and no “big names” from EU institutions. As already mentioned, they argued that when an official has a personal connection to the country or region where the young people live, they can identify with him or her.

### 3.5 Supporting Transnational Perspectives

In addition to the local focus of most youth participation projects, the transnational perspective, i.e. horizontal linkages across EU member states, was frequently mentioned as another success factor. While the Czech and Slovakian projects and the Latvian project *The Best Is Yet to Come* were the only cross-border ventures in our sample, they and the Polish organisers of the *European Youth Week* emphasised the importance of projects beyond country borders (e.g. exchanges and field trips). The Latvian project organiser argued that it is important to recognise that across different countries there are similar experiences with political issues (especially in rural areas across post-socialist countries). These structural problems occur in several EU member states, and once you realise that there are similarities, it lays the foundation for a European strategy to solve those problems. Secondly, several interviewees theorised that a transnational exchange helps to understand different cultures and their various ways of dealing with the same issue. On the one hand, this can increase mutual respect in the Union, while on the other hand, this creates the possibility of learning from each other's coping strategies. Thirdly, they argued that as a positive side effect of transnational activities, one can gain intercultural competences like a cosmopolitan attitude, the ability to adapt to different situations, and appropriate language skills. Those are essential skills for active EU citizenship.

### 3.6 Experienced Organisation Team

Interviewees often mentioned that successful participation projects require an organisational team that has both experience and expertise in establishing dialogue projects. Several of the examined projects had already taken place twice or more (albeit in slightly changing forms), which means that organisers constantly learned and applied their new knowledge in the following project. According to the *Youth Forum* organisers from Poland, experienced staff not only increases the chance for successful projects but also makes the planning stage more efficient. The Polish interviewee for the *European Youth Week* highlighted the fact that experienced actors have better access to information and relevant partners and suggested that new project members be trained by the more experienced staff. In doing so, the whole team can benefit from one single member. According to the organisers of the Czech and Slovakian project *Decide on Europe*, projects significantly benefit from experience because it increases their ability to adapt the project to changing political developments, to use new innovative dialogue methods, and to quickly change funding options when necessary.

### 3.7 Established Networks

Strongly connected to the organisers' experience level is the extent to which the organisation is embedded in established networks. The interviewees often argued

that such a network is crucial for a successful project. In some regions, like the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where support for EU-related projects by schools is not the rule, networks were seen as essential for establishing the project and reaching the targeted individuals (cf. *Reaching Those Who Should Be Trained* in Chap. 10 in this volume). According to both Polish projects, it is also a lot easier to receive sufficient funding when the project is surrounded by a solid network. Being known in a region was also said to help to save time while organising participation projects. While in big cities there are a lot of NGOs and initiatives for political education and participation, the infrastructure for civil engagement in rural areas often is less developed. This means that in areas where this infrastructure is most needed, it is particularly difficult to establish projects. Supra-regional networks can play an important role here.

### **3.8 Providing an Empowering Discussion Environment**

Creating a room where young people can openly express their views and needs when it comes to discussing topics was also mentioned as being important. That includes an environment that promotes deliberative processes among participants with different views and helps people to advocate their beliefs in the presence of others. However, the interviewees did not elaborate on how exactly to create such a discussion environment. The organisers of the Czech and Slovakian participation project stated that it was important to offer students pressure-free education. Instead of school stress, they were merely guided through the project. This was perceived as a key factor for encouraging young people to express themselves, since political opinion-forming cannot be achieved by force. To encourage the participation of even shy participants, small discussion groups were formed. The organisers had the impression that students had no fear of speaking in these small groups.

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## **4 Discussion of the Success Factors**

As mentioned, all examined projects aimed at strengthening the participation of young people. The success factors identified are to a large extent a response to the challenges in rural areas (cf. Chap. 2 and Chap. 10). The contextual conditions are characterised by a low interest in politics, underdeveloped youth work, challenging living conditions, a lack of prior knowledge, and unstable motivation. Adapting the dialogue formats as much as possible to the target group, involving the young people in the organising process, as well as arousing their interest in the EU through local issues, can be understood as ways of dealing with these difficult contextual conditions. Some success factors that the interviewees mentioned are similar to observations made in the mentioned study of other Erasmus+ youth dialogue projects (Fennes and Gadinger 2021). Others, however, go beyond them, e.g. networking between project organisers and linking the national and European levels. Some are also mentioned in scholarly literature.

For example, political science has long been concerned with the concept of self-efficacy and its influence on political behaviour (cf. Madsen 1987), since it is known to increase political participation (see pp. 1013 in Caprara et al. 2009). Therefore, it is particularly important to show participants that their voice is heard. However, it is also important not to abuse this feeling of self-empowerment. Care should be taken to ensure that the participants' opinions have an impact on politics or politicians. Otherwise, it is merely staged participation (see p. 23 in Nanz and Fritsche 2012). Since the present projects primarily used discussions with decision makers to transfer participants' thoughts and results into the political sphere (apart from one exception in which a final document was written), it is difficult to measure the influence of these encounters. There is not enough information available to conclude that the projects have led to a political outcome (see also Chap. 10). Therefore, projects should make it transparent that they are dialogue formats and not participation forums. At most, they fulfil the purpose of consultation.

The 2021 *European Parliament Youth Survey* shows that while only 15% of the European citizens between sixteen and thirty have a negative image of the EU (see p. 52 in 2021), only 29% think they have (at least some) influence on European politics. This number increases up to 44% when it comes to influencing politics in a local area (ibid, p. 14). It is not a new finding that people feel more influential the closer the sphere of governance is. But it shows the necessity of the EU reaching out actively to young people and that local issues and European politics are interrelated. Obviously, this does not mean that people necessarily must deal with complex European policies. As the interviewees declared, local circumstances often can be transferred to other regions in the Union. Many local aspects (like clean drinking water) or struggles have a European dimension. It is the task of the politicians consulted to pass on the concerns of young people and, if necessary, to advocate for them at a local, national, or European level.

As the projects studied were part of the Erasmus+ funding, it is of particular interest to compare the success factors mentioned by the interviewees with the award criteria applied by the European Commission to select project applications for funding (European Commission 2022). The Commission's criteria are very much in line with what the interviewees mentioned as being relevant for the success of such projects. Inter alia, the focus of the methods and topics on the target group, which was underlined as being important by all interviewees, is also a criterion for the EU project selection: "The consistency between identified needs, project objectives, the participant profiles, and activities proposed [...]" should be checked by the project evaluators, the Commission says. Furthermore, our interviewees declared the involvement of the target group in all stages of the project work as being relevant. This fits the EU award criterion as to the "extent to which young people are involved in all phases of the activities". Also, the strong suggestion of practitioners to give participants a voice and train them to express their ideas is mirrored by the EU selection criteria which include the "[...] potential impact of the project [...] outside the organisations and individuals directly participating in the project, at local, regional, national, and/or European or global level."

Other suggestions by the interviewed practitioners, namely, the linking of European and local levels or the support of a transnational perspective, are not part of the award criteria, but are indirectly covered by the requirement to deal in the projects with issues related to the overall programme outline of the Erasmus+ dialogues. Whether the organising team is experienced is also not explicitly mentioned as a criterion, thus providing an even access for experienced organisations and project newcomers. In fact, the inclusion of newcomer organisations is evaluated positively. The interviewees mentioned also established networks as an important success factor. In the EU selection criteria, this idea is covered by the criterion the “quality of the cooperation and communication between [...] participating organisations, as well as with other relevant stakeholders”. An encouraging discussion environment, which was also mentioned by the practitioners, is covered by the EU award criteria the “appropriateness of the participative learning methods proposed [...]” and the “extent to which the project makes use of alternative, innovative, and smart forms of youth participation [...]”.

In summary, many of the success factors identified by the practitioners are reflected in the EU award criteria. This is a good sign for the suitability of the EU approach. The overlap might also mirror the adaptation of the EU funding beneficiaries’ views (or statements) to the funding criteria, which, however, would also be in the EU’s interest. Despite the mentioned overlaps, the EU criteria have a stronger focus on evaluation, the documentation of results, and sustainability in comparison to the success factors mentioned by the interviewed practitioners.

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## 5 Conclusion and Outlook

Starting from the observation that participation in general and youth participation in East Central Europe in particular face problems, this chapter has aimed at identifying those factors that organisers of EU youth dialogue projects perceive as success factors for their projects. It first sketched out what kind of participation the EU supports with its Erasmus+ programme and argued that identifying success factors is not an “objective” task, but depends on the ideal models of participation and democracy. The approach in this study was to measure inductively what project organisers, as experts in their field, regard as success factors for youth projects.

With regard to fostering active participation, it became clear that a strong thematic focus on a target group is of great importance. At best, the target group should be involved in the planning process. Furthermore, it seems relevant to show the participants that their involvement is not in vain. It should be made clear that their voice is also heard outside the project environment. In addition, a strong link between the local and the European level is important to arouse interest in European issues among the young participants. The promotion of transnational perspectives can also be helpful. Finally, an experienced organisation team, extensive networking, and creating an encouraging discussion environment for the participants are named as factors for successful dialogue projects.

As mentioned before, these considerations are based on the individual perceptions of the project organisers. They mirror the expertise and experience of the interviewees but may be influenced by their subjective impressions, adaptations to the funders' expectations, or rational calculations. For further research on (perceptions of) success factors of youth dialogue projects in the EU, it would be helpful to focus on certain aspects in more detail or to systematically compare the project organisers' views with the views of the participants. Moreover, additional project evaluations based on a larger sample and additional data for standardised indicators, including context factors like types of settlements or budgets, would be helpful. Finally, it would be interesting to systematically analyse if participation in youth dialogue projects increases the use of citizen rights like the right to participation (in elections or beyond) in a sustainable way.

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# Challenges for Participation and Empowerment. Six Youth Dialogue Projects in Comparative Perspective

Swantje Treimer and Astrid Lorenz 

## 1 Introduction

Youth work aimed at empowering people to be active citizens is demanding. For example, it is not easy to engage and motivate a target group of young people because they may not be aware of the benefits of using all of their citizen rights. Therefore, measures must be carefully crafted by a motivated team equipped with enough time and other resources. Youth work projects are further challenged by the specific contextual conditions they encounter. Reaching out to the target group can be difficult, for example, because of poor infrastructure in a given region. Furthermore, interregional disparities can lead to regionally differing perceptions of the EU, requiring different approaches to discussing EU-related matters. While the European Union strives to enhance the dialogue between politics and the youth everywhere, efforts to establish such a dialogue are thus faced with very diverse living conditions and EU perceptions. The “surge in disparities” caused by different crises in recent years is not only “one of the main causes for the current lack of popular support for the project to build the European Union” (Monfort 2020), it also makes efforts to regain support difficult.

To contribute to improving youth empowering projects in the EU and beyond, this chapter compares the practical challenges encountered by six projects in the post-socialist regions of the European Union. All of them were funded by Erasmus+ within the framework of the EU Youth Dialogue projects in 2019. It is not the aim to evaluate the overall project quality of these projects, which would require a different

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methodology.<sup>1</sup> Instead, this chapter systematises and compares mainly what project *organisers themselves* identify as challenges to youth projects and benefits from their expertise in their fields, their familiarity with the particular framework conditions in their region, and the practices of EU-related participatory youth projects. In almost all cases, these are people with long experience in youth work who can adequately assess the processes in their projects. Interviews with such experts are thus very valuable sources for the studies of Erasmus+ projects (Fennes and Gadinger 2021). In our case, they were interviewed as part of the Leipzig Jean Monnet Centre's work from May to July, 2022.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter first systematises the difficulties of implementing the youth dialogue project works that were mentioned by the project organisers.<sup>3</sup> It thereby identifies typical challenges described by the interviewees in the post-socialist regions. Next, the findings are interpreted in light of previous studies on youth work and European citizenship that did not specifically focus on our region of interest. The final section provides a brief summary and suggestions for further research.

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## 2 Challenges to Youth Work as Reported by the Organisations

Table 1 summarises the main challenges to the youth dialogue projects that the interviewed persons, representatives of the project organisation teams, mentioned when asked about difficulties with their youth dialogue projects. The order reflects the sequence of mentioning the problems by the interviewees or the relevance that they paid to the issues in cases where they mentioned a ranking.

In short, the difficulties were related to the general infrastructure and youth work infrastructure, the project funding (amount, duration), the information concerning the EU programs, the target group (reachability, motivation), cooperation partners (schools, politicians/local officials, EU), and other practical challenges. However, the problems did not occur everywhere and in the same way. The table reveals that typical difficulties, mentioned independently by several project managing organisations, include an unstable or low or de facto not evenly accessible funding level, an unbalanced interest of a target group of young people in EU issues, and their unstable motivation. The access to funding and the unbalanced interest of a target group have a spatial dimension. With regard to funding, the NGOs in the post-socialist areas – in contrast to West-European NGOs – often do not dispose of many of their own resources and thus depend on external funding. With regard to interest and motivation, young people in the post-socialist areas are embedded in societies

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<sup>1</sup>Some experts even question if standardised evaluations are useful if the aims of participatory measures, their formats and context conditions differ, because the results of the measures to increase participation are dependent on such factors. (see p. 40 in Geißel 2008)

<sup>2</sup>For details of the methodological approach see the chapter of Kirtzel and Lorenz in this volume.

<sup>3</sup>For more details, see the reports on the single projects in Chapters 11–16.

**Table 1** Reported challenges for youth dialogue projects

Kielce, Poland (Chap. 11)	Low budget, funding, difficulties in reaching young people, uneven accessibility of information about EU programs, reluctance of teachers to cooperate, imbalanced interest of young people in participation
Mińsk Mazowiecki, Poland (Chap. 12)	Difficulties getting local decision-makers involved, low commitment of local decision-makers to take the subjects of the dialogue seriously, unstable long-term motivation among young people to engage, low interest of youth in preparing formal documents which are important for guiding politicians
Nation-wide events in the Czech Republic & Slovakia (Chap. 13)	Socially unbalanced interest in EU issues, difficulty for rural youth to access events in cities, reluctance especially from vocational schools in rural areas to cooperate, funding low and limited in time
Orosháza and Szarvas, Hungary (Chap. 14)	Reluctance of local officials and partners towards social projects, skepticism towards EU-funded projects without an infrastructural character, poor infrastructural situation in remote rural areas, de facto uneven access to funding opportunities
Latvia with international elements abroad (Chap. 15)	Peculiarities of the target group (interest in being taken seriously vs. unstable and issue-dependent commitment, unstable long-term motivation), funding that is not reliable and limited in time, low attention of the EU to bringing it closer to people and asking them to express their ideas
Rural areas in Eastern Germany (Chap. 16)	Unstable funding, funding only for the project and the infrastructure required to realise the project, no permanent local structures, and no sufficient linkages between national and EU-related youth work structures

Source: own summary, based on Chaps. 11–16 in this volume

which are not characterised by strong EU enthusiasm, which might influence their willingness to participate.

Some challenges were mentioned by some, but not all interviewees, e.g. the restraint of public officials to cooperate or to take the discussed topics seriously, and infrastructural shortcomings or long distances to cities where EU information is provided and where EU-related events take place much more frequently. These difficulties do also have a spatial dimension. The restraint to cooperate with EU-related civil society organisations might be connected to attitudes and the culture especially outside the large centres of the region, but this cannot be substantiated on the basis of the available data. Likewise, infrastructural shortcomings do not exist everywhere in post-socialist areas but in some remote rural regions. This means that when planning youth work aimed at empowering people, it is necessary to differentiate within the post-socialist areas.

The following section discusses some of the challenging context conditions and difficulties for project planning and implementation mentioned by the interviewees in greater detail. It also deals with some difficulties that were evident from the

interviewees' accounts of their projects, but which were not explicitly identified by them as "problems" when asked about them (and therefore are not named in Table 1). Often it was precisely the difficult context conditions that motivated the project managers to organise and conduct the project with the aim of improving the situation.

## 2.1 Attitudes Towards the EU

People's attitudes toward the EU and EU citizenship vary across the cases, and this might influence how people feel about EU-related projects. The Czech population's support for EU membership is generally low. In Hungary, attitudes towards the EU are fairly positive, but the interviewee reported that EU funds not related to infrastructure projects were met with skepticism. Since the presented participation projects were all financed by EU funds and/or were related to the EU in terms of content, there was a general skepticism among the population about these projects.

Often EU-related attitudes also vary across countries; e.g. in Latvia or Poland young people tend to view the EU more positively than the *general* population. And yet, the reports on the context conditions of the youth dialogue projects reveal that a substantial share of young people supports parties which use an EU critical rhetoric, at least occasionally. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned that young people consider the EU as something far away and that EU level actors would not be their first choice if they could choose their dialogue partners. This is not the best precondition for EU-related projects.

## 2.2 Low Interest in Politics

Like attitudes toward the EU, the population's relationship to politics in general varies by region and country. The reports on the context conditions of the youth dialogue projects reveal that young people in the post-socialist areas often show a low level of political participation and interest, and that political interest can be socially biased. In the Czech Republic, it was mentioned that people generally perceive politics as something negative. This in turn had a negative impact on the outreach of the *Decide on Europe* project. Many principals or teachers of the invited schools, especially in rural areas, refused to participate in the project because they suspected a political agenda behind the organisation and assumed the project would pursue specific political goals. For this reason, many students, especially in the Czech Republic, could not be reached and informed about the EU, and their views on EU issues could not be dealt with.

This example shows that cooperation between actors in the field of political education and political decision-makers, as a key aim of youth dialogue projects, can be prevented by having an environment where politics is not well-perceived. While not all schools refused to cooperate, it needed more time to put them into

action, and the prospect for reaching out to those who are not interested in politics is much weaker than elsewhere.

### **2.3 Challenging Living Conditions in Remote Rural Areas**

The reports mention an increased exodus of young people in many regions across East Central Europe. As particularly highlighted by interviewees in Latvia and Poland, young people are moving to larger cities or abroad for training, studies, or in search of work as they do not see future prospects for themselves in rural regions due to a lack of jobs, a poorly developed infrastructure, and few youth work opportunities. While in general, the rural youth is more susceptible to unemployment in Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary (Eurostat 2017), the overall unemployment is not very high in the rural regions because of the out-migration. In fact, unemployment as such was only mentioned as a problem by the interviewees for the south-eastern regions of Hungary and Slovakia.

The interviewees of the project *The Best Is Yet to Come* and *(Un)Attractive* reported that people are less satisfied with their lives in rural areas than in the more centrally located districts of their country (Latvia and Hungary). The Hungarian interviewee emphasised that this is especially true for remote rural areas (and not all rural areas in general), where people are more concerned with coping with basic everyday problems than issues like EU citizenship. Poor economic circumstances and dissatisfaction with living conditions are in many cases accompanied by a feeling of powerlessness. For this reason, young people in particular might not easily be motivated to participate as citizens because they have the feeling that nothing will change despite their involvement. Thus, to give them a feeling of being heard and to empower them was both a motivation as well as an obstacle for several projects.

### **2.4 Underdeveloped Youth Work in Remote Rural Areas**

Many interviews revealed that the youth dialogue projects are challenged by the generally poor position of social work in the individual countries. The interviewee for the Czech and Slovak youth dialogues reported a reluctance to cooperate, especially from vocational schools in rural areas. In Poland, youth work usually means “underground work”, as can be seen from the report on the *Mińsk Youth Forum*. The interviewee for the Hungarian project *(un)Attractive? II* for example, argued that the commitment of individual project partners in the communities of remote rural areas was low for social projects and youth work and that there is often a lack of facilities for the youth to meet in these regions. In addition, youth dialogue projects and youth work in general are severely underfunded in Hungary. Under these conditions, it is much more difficult to reach out for participants and to stimulate sustainable participation and youth involvement in local affairs.

## 2.5 Difficulties in Reaching the Target Group

In order to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the EU across borders, it is necessary that as many people as possible learn about participation opportunities. Youth dialogue projects can offer an opportunity to do this if they manage to reach many participants. In practice, however, usually only a smaller part of the youth felt addressed by projects which included a longer engagement, even though the participation in single events was higher. Those who participated with more interest were often already interested in EU issues or engaged in other respective projects. For example, the interviewees from the projects in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia reported that EU-related projects tended to involve students and young people who already had a lot of knowledge about the EU and their participation opportunities. Reaching out to a broader number of participants in rural areas was also difficult because of poor infrastructure, which made it difficult to find common time slots for activities in Hungary, for example.

For some formats of youth dialogue, especially those with a more trans-European or international character, a good command of foreign languages is a prerequisite. Language courses and especially English skills, however, are often less developed in rural regions. The lack of language skills makes it difficult for young people to express themselves in the projects, which ultimately hinders their participation. Therefore, some interviewees, like in the Hungarian case, stick to basic-level EU-related projects that are limited to the local level and do not entail interaction with other actors outside the country for remote rural areas, although they are experienced also in conducting international projects in other regions. Several interviewees declared that for better outreach to a target group of people with low knowledge, the EU should give more support. The initiators of the *EYW 2019 Kielce* demanded help with social media measures and appealing program-related websites with simple instructions.

## 2.6 Unstable Motivation of Young People

The project interviews reveal that the project organisations did not always involve the target group in the planning and implementation of the projects because they could not count on young people being constantly motivated from the start until the end of a youth dialogue project. Several interviewees, e.g. in the East German case, argued that it is difficult to involve young people in the long term, as they are often busy with various other (life) problems and have little capacity for involvement. In most projects, the young people were able to influence the topics of the discussions and come up with their own thoughts about their region. However, they did not engage in planning the regional projects.

Only in the *Minsk Youth Forum* (Poland) and *The Best Is Yet to Come* (Latvia) projects were young people explicitly involved in the whole planning process. In the *European Youth Week* project in Kielce (Poland), young people were explicitly involved in the last phase of the dialogues. As the interviewee himself noted, this

reduced the opportunity for young people to assume personal responsibility and expand their participation skills. Even though the reason for not including the target group is plausible, it can result in an “inauthentic” collaboration, as described in the report on the *Minsk Youth Forum*. The biggest problem in this case was that the suggestions made by the young people, according to their perception, did not carry any weight and were not taken seriously enough.

## 2.7 Lack of Prior Knowledge

The interviewees suggested that in the rural regions of all countries there is a lack of knowledge about the EU, about participation opportunities at the EU level, and especially about funding opportunities. This limits the options for project contents and formats because many advanced and more interesting formats, such as simulations or discussions with EU politicians, require a higher level of knowledge. Several projects, like the German *Experiencing and Understanding Europe*, tackled the problem by doing groundwork and conducting their workshops mainly to inform about the EU. Likewise, the project *Decide on Europe* wanted to inform the participants primarily about the EU and EU decision-making processes.

Other projects tackled the problem of a lack of EU-related knowledge (or maybe also interest) by focusing on local issues. This was, for example, the case for *The Best Is Yet to Come* from the Latvian organisation Lauku Forum, which concentrated on topics of rural development in Europe. Through capacity building processes, young people were able to increase their knowledge of rural development during the project by sharing ideas with their peers in their own country and in other EU countries. In the Czech and Slovak project, it was also argued that speaking about local issues can be a starting point, also for illustrating entanglements with the European Union.

## 2.8 No Systematic Consideration of the Youth Dialogue Results by Decision-Makers

As already mentioned, political decision-makers and officials were not always very open to the projects, especially with regard to agreeing on binding results and policy recommendations. This is probably why five of the six projects did not plan in advance any concrete consequences that should result from the youth dialogues for political decision-making processes. In the projects *EYW Kielce*, *Mińsk Youth Forum* and *(un)Attractive? II*, young people entered into dialogue with local decision-makers, and there were some attempts to summarise the conclusions and recommendations from the debates. EU politicians participated in the three-day meeting within the project *Decide on Europe* in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. However, the focus of this meeting was to show the participating young people how the EU works and what it is like to be an EU politician for a day. Written conclusions summarising concrete measures to induce political changes were not available.

Only the international project *The Best Is Yet to Come* conducted by the Latvian organisation prepared a final declaration that was presented in Brussels and was said to have impressed the politicians there. Further information on the implementation of the demands, however, is not publicly available. As noted in the report of the project *Mińsk Youth Forum*, the formulation of policy demands and suggestions during the youth dialogue events does not automatically result in their implementation. To improve this, the intercultural development foundation EBU calls for specific EU strategy papers on youth participation at the local level. The interviewee of the Hungarian project additionally suggested that the EU should appeal to the municipalities and national governments to give youth participation a higher priority.

## 2.9 Unclear Long-Term Effects

Another problem that arises for projects is the frequent lack of visible, long-term effects. Many interviewees argued that in order to signal to young people that the decision-makers are actually interested in their needs, youth dialogues need to have a continuous basis and not be one-time events. In line with previous studies, this suggests that they need to be integrated into existing local structures and regular youth work (see p. 9 to 13 in Tham 2007). However, even if there were concrete agreements on local partnerships between the project organisers and the local government, this did not guarantee that the project idea would be continued. The experience from the Hungarian project (*un*)*Attractive? II* reveals that despite the close cooperation between the local structures and the organisation, only one out of five projects was continued after the project.

The different demands of decision-makers and young people can impede the planning of longer-term cooperation. Due to their various tasks and busy schedules, decision-makers need dates that can be planned for the long term. By contrast, young people have difficulties maintaining motivation for a project over a longer period of time. Tasks involving long-term planning, such as transforming ideas into strategy papers and implementation programs, are sometimes very demanding and quickly seem unattractive to young people. Since the participation formats were mostly only project-related, contacts between the participants and within the organising team also quickly broke down, which lowered the motivation for renewed, long-term collaboration.

The lack of lasting contacts between the project participants might also be related to the fact that despite their considerable time commitment the young people participated mainly on a voluntary basis and were not remunerated. This was shown by the long-term evaluation of the project *The Best Is Yet to Come*. However, several interviewees highlighted the fact that participants in the project learned a lot and received jobs in which they could apply their qualifications. So while the project might not be the basis for a permanent structured dialogue between young people and officials and decision-makers, knowledge building and training can have a lasting character, even if this is less visible.



## 2.10 Funding

All the project organisers interviewed assessed the EU funding scheme very positively but mentioned problems with funding. The difficulties around funding are not simply related to the amount of money beneficiaries received from the EU, although in some cases funding was perceived as too low. Besides, the interviews revealed that the financial background varies considerably across the projects. If organisations are close to a local municipality or state and receive support from them in terms of accommodation or personnel, they apply only for additional resources. The two projects in Poland received the smallest amount of funding compared to the others, and it was used exclusively for the implementation of the projects, not for the maintenance of the organisation, the financing of permanent staff, or the establishment of sustainable structures. This was also true for the East German project, whose organiser is supported by the city of Leipzig and other public authorities. In contrast, the interviewed organisation in Hungary does not receive national funding because, according to the organisation, the approval of funds depends on the issues and political views of the applicants. Therefore, it focuses on EU funding, which covers almost its entire annual budget, including staff, materials, and expert fees.

More often than a low budget, the interviewees mentioned the de facto uneven access to the funding for different groups of people and different regions although it is in principle open to all. They argued that while the EU funding application process is, for experienced organisations, transparent and rather simple, organisations in rural regions have difficulties in getting in touch with EU actors and applying for funding. Especially for young people and other persons without longer experience with EU projects, the system is perceived as too slow and confusing. All interviewees declared that there is little knowledge about funding opportunities and application procedures. In order to inform more people about the funding opportunities, more mobile representatives, an expansion of the Erasmus offices in the regions, or more widespread offers of information are considered necessary. The Hungarian interviewee argued that while reaching out to the people with information is maybe more the duty of a member state, the organisation felt that the EU has the duty to cover such tasks if they are neglected by the member states.

Another funding-related problem mentioned several times is the project character of EU youth work and EU youth dialogues. In most cases, those interested in funding need to reapply every other year with different project outlines. There is no continuous funding although organising dialogue and increasing EU knowledge are continuous tasks. This creates uncertain situations and worries about job insecurity for those who are organising the projects. Qualified and experienced staff may leave the organisation for more secure and well-paid jobs, which poses a major problem for the long-term maintenance of projects and expertise. In addition to this, the relative inflexibility and activity orientation of EU funding were mentioned several times. The project organisations would prefer to have more planning freedom and independence in the implementation phase. The EU guidelines were described as mostly result oriented, which means that predetermined procedures had to be followed in the process, even though it was foreseeable that these would not lead to the desired

results. In addition, strictly regulated financial reports had to be prepared on a regular basis, which meant a high workload for the organisations and thus impaired the effectiveness of the project.

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### 3 Discussion of the Findings

The mentioned problems confirm the findings and observations made in several strands of research. It has been highlighted that informal education has to respond to challenges like a low interest in politics (see p. 547 in Becerik Yoldaş 2015; see p. 38 in Kahne and Middaugh 2008). Moreover, several recent studies have shown empirically that the peculiarities of the living conditions in rural areas influence the perceptions of politics (e.g. Rodríguez-Pose 2018). An empirical analysis of the EU population by Lago (see p. 768 in Lago 2022) concludes that citizen satisfaction with democracy “is heavily influenced by whether people live in urban or rural areas and whether inhabitants in rural areas are surrounded by many people or not. Those who live in rural areas are significantly less satisfied with the way democracy works than are those who live in urban areas, even after controlling for an array of individual-level characteristics that typically distinguish rural and urban populations.” For post-socialist regions, studies have diagnosed a weak civil society, resulting from the problems of the political and economic transition and legacies of the past (Kutter and Trappmann 2010; Weiss 2020; Mikecz 2023; Stoenescu 2022). In this sense, underdeveloped youth work in rural areas comes as no surprise.

Research thus suggests that a great part of the difficulties of youth dialogue projects mentioned above, e.g. the problems of reaching out to a target group, finding partners willing to cooperate, and a lack of one’s own financial resources, are structural ones, meaning that they cannot be solved easily within a couple of years. Moreover, it is evident that individual organisations cannot solve these problems alone. Thus, youth dialogues and youth dialogue programs need to be integrated into broader approaches to tackle the problems, as it is done, for example, in EU regional policy.

With regard to the most often mentioned problems of funding, it is evident that, in general, the post-socialist countries still have a comparatively low GDP, although incomes have grown considerably. NGOs interested in providing informal education on the EU or other issues refer for external funding either to the state or, more often, the EU, and to foundations from abroad, e.g. the Open Society Foundation, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, or to NGOs and foundations which themselves receive funding also from abroad, like the Civil Society Development Foundation and the Romanian-American Foundation in Romania (see p. 90 in Stoenescu 2022). The availability of such funding is a great chance to realise the respective projects, which otherwise would not have been conducted, but the organisations remain highly dependent on the source of financing. In contrast to wealthier countries, the dependence on funding reduces the chance to get the best personnel, to provide secure jobs, and to realise education and dialogue projects in a strategic way.

Since there is “a close link between strengthening active citizenship and education and youth work” (see p. 11 in Tham 2007, own translation), the predominantly precarious circumstances of youth work in rural areas throughout East Central Europe are a fundamental obstacle to sustainable youth participation in general. The general disenchantment with politics in society and the bad image of politics in some of the East Central European countries are also long-term problems. “Successful youth participation requires a positive relationship between youth and politics for both sides,” as Feldmann-Wojtachnia (see p. 8 in Feldmann-Wojtachnia 2007, own translation) put it. In order to ensure that youth dialogues do not remain merely an articulation of ideas for change, linkages between political decision-making processes and educational work are necessary (see p. 10 in Feldmann-Wojtachnia 2007). In addition, youth participation needs to be integrated into local structures for a long-term effect (see p. 13 in Tham 2007). It seems that there is a long way to go before such integration is achieved in the countries where the projects were conducted, but the first positive results, like the ones in Mińsk Mazowieckie or in one of the Hungarian municipalities, are promising.

There is a consensus in the literature that *binding* procedures linking citizen participation to political decision-making processes are necessary for successful participation (Feldmann-Wojtachnia 2007; Nanz and Fritsche 2012). This implies that future youth projects should pay more attention to making binding decisions in order to increase the mobilisation potential. This, however, may become an obstacle to getting support for the youth dialogues from politicians and officials. An alternative is to be as transparent as possible about the non-binding character of the outcomes. Nanz and Fritsche (see p. 130 in Nanz and Fritsche 2012) suggest that the initiators should ensure that the participants are informed about the influence of public participation in the further decision-making process after the project has been implemented. It should be explained publicly which results were taken into account in political decisions and which were not (see p. 130 in Nanz and Fritsche 2012). In the best case, the effects should be visible and relevant. If no or little information is available, this could cause the project to be perceived as an “alibi participation” (see p. 10 in Feldmann-Wojtachnia 2007) and even prevent participation in future projects. This would be problematic for the development of a European civil society.

While the projects could not change the rather persistent context conditions, it became evident that they contributed to increasing the participants’ knowledge about the European Union and the multi-level character of politics in the Union. Studies on civic participation assume that the acquisition of knowledge through youth participation projects is positively related to the willingness of young people to participate in social and political processes, to make their own judgment, and ultimately to get involved (Feldmann-Wojtachnia 2007; Tham 2007; Nanz and Fritsche 2012). Thus, the projects were very important for promoting EU citizenship in rural regions by providing knowledge, actively engaging young people, and stimulating new ideas and insights. If such processes of informal participation beyond elections really increase participation in general, is, however, disputed (see p. 35 in Geißel 2008).

Like nearly all persons interviewed, research on participation suggests that such projects should not just be a one-time event, but be designed for the long term or

institutionalised to increase interest (Lorenz et al. 2020). This means that there would be a need for an established framework for young people to be involved in the political processes inside the EU. This seems to be particularly necessary in regions with structural obstacles to participation and youth work. Together with the arguments above, that suggests that funding should be extended to longer time periods and leave room for bottom-up approaches (see p. 12 in Tham 2007). Under such conditions, the organisations could involve the participants early on. Even though this is not a direct criterion for the success of the project, it is a favorable condition for project success (see p. 33f. in Geißel 2008).

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## 4 Conclusion and Perspectives

The European Union has adopted a youth strategy programme and established extensive funding opportunities within the Erasmus+ framework. Involving youth in making decisions that directly affect them is one of its declared goals. The present chapter has compared the experiences of six youth dialogue projects funded by the EU with regard to challenges throughout the projects. Knowing these difficulties can contribute to improve the effectiveness of future projects.

The challenges that the organisations mentioned included the project character and limited periods of funding, the difficulty of reaching their target group in rural areas (especially remote rural areas) and motivating young people to be engaged for a longer time. Other challenges mentioned were the need to actively engage local decision-makers and make them take the subjects of the youth dialogue projects seriously, infrastructural problems, and an uneven access to information about EU programs. A number of these issues were discussed in more detail, and the findings were then linked to some overall observations from research.

Several of the identified problems are related to the particular context conditions of the projects, e.g. scarce financial resources and limited awareness of the EU. Given these obstacles, most project organisations suggested that the EU should provide funding for longer periods. Most of them also demanded that the EU acknowledge the relevance of local venues and local politics for EU citizenship and decision-making. Closer cooperation with and support from local actors was often mentioned as necessary.

More research is needed on how to tackle such obstacles in a systematic way. Besides, it is necessary to understand how these manifold problems can be solved in a coherent way. How to ensure, for example, high-quality projects through prolonged or regular funding without compromising the independence of civil society measures from the EU? How to ensure the openness of politicians to opinions and demands raised in youth dialogues by reaching more binding decisions without decreasing the willingness of young policy-newcomers to engage in dialogue projects? Future research needs to address these questions.

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# A Project by Young People for Young People: The *European Youth Week* 2019 in Kielce

Katharina Habelt and Jennifer Despang

## 1 Introduction

The European Youth Week 2019 was a project carried out from 1 May to 30 September 2019 by the Regional Volunteer Centre (*Regionalne Centrum Wolontariatu*) in Kielce, Poland. Such Youth Weeks take place every 2 years in all European countries participating in Erasmus+ and are funded within the Erasmus + framework. They are part of the EU's approach known as Structured Dialogue, which aims at consulting young people on topics that are important for the European Commission and for the European Union in general to help develop policies (European Commission 2022). The local organiser, the Regional Volunteer Centre, is active in Kielce, a city with around 200,000 inhabitants located in central Poland between Warsaw and Kraków and the capital of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship.<sup>1</sup>

The project was part of numerous measures taken by the Regional Volunteer Centre in the field of youth work. The organisation has been active since 2005. It engages mainly in projects within Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, which is the EU programme for the exchange of international volunteers (European Union 2022). Its main issues are youth participation, leadership development, and local and international volunteering. It trains volunteers and volunteer managers and provides space for young people who want to be active and get involved in the local community. Furthermore, it carries out international projects. The NGO is also part of Eurodesk, a European youth information network working that works as a support organisation for Erasmus+. In this context, it organises debates on topics like youth

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<sup>1</sup>The chapter is based mainly on an interview with Michał Braun on 13 June 2022. We are grateful for his first-hand information and his insights in the aforementioned project as well as his general experience with youth projects.

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participation, human rights, democracy, and local democracy. Furthermore, the centre provides some local and national volunteering programmes. It also works with decision-makers, supports youth councils and youth councillors, and is a member of the Polish National Youth Council.

The various projects are backed by linkages between NGO members and other actors. Some members of the organisation work in schools, kindergartens, youth clubs, and social centres and coordinate international volunteering for various organisations. The centre has a number of project partners abroad, for example, in Bulgaria, Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy, Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, and Germany. It also cooperates in projects that go beyond Europe, e.g. in Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Senegal, Uganda, South Africa, and India.

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## **2 The Project Environment: A Divided Country with Many Challenges**

To understand how European youth projects work, one needs to look at the local and regional environment in which the organisation operates. When it comes to elections, the west of Poland is more liberal and the east is much more conservative (Zarycki 2015). Moreover, there are differences between the big cities and the villages. In general, the people in the region of Kielce are between these extremes. As the interviewed project manager reports, they seem to be satisfied with their lives, although the actual situation in Poland is shaped by the stress factors of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In his view, the people in Kielce are openhearted, very hospitable to refugees, and very involved. Regarding youth participation, there is still room for improvement because there are a lot of young people who just do not know what possibilities they have. Therefore, the Regional Volunteer Centre organises a lot of European projects for young people (Marcinkiewicz 2018).

Unemployment among young people is not a big issue in Poland. In the region of the organisation, the unemployment rate is about 7%, making it one of the lowest ever (Statistical Office in Kielce 2021). The more important problem is that people who are very qualified often do not get jobs which correspond with their qualifications. At the same time, there are companies that report not finding suitable applicants for their job offers. Thus, the labour market is influenced by out-migration (Kaczmarczyk and Okólski 2008). Another problem is that the minimum salary in Poland has risen considerably throughout the last few years, while those who are paid just above the minimum wage feel no change. The result is frustration, especially because the payment is not adjusted for the qualification. For example, a facility manager at a school earns almost as much as a teacher who has completed a university degree. Another consequence could be a social crisis, because more and more people could quit their jobs because they are severely underpaid.



### 3 The Project: Involving and Empowering Young People

In 2019, the European Youth Week events taking place across Europe addressed the overarching theme “Democracy and me” (European Union 2019). In Kielce, young people organised consultations with other young people and inhabitants of the city. The first aim of the project was to start dialogue between people, especially regarding local issues. The second aim was also to foster dialogue between decision-makers and the young people in the city. Thirdly, the project aimed at promoting the European Youth Week, Erasmus+, and youth policy.

The project was led by a person with long-term experience in local and international voluntary work, Michał Braun. He acted as president of the Regional Volunteer Centre for 5 years and is a local and city councillor as well. His motivation to work with young people in Europe is based on his belief in the aims of local engagement, the support of young people, and his desire to share his own Erasmus + experience. It was easy for the organisation to get information about the possibility of EU funding because the volunteer centre is very experienced and, as previously mentioned, also acts as a Eurodesk contact point, where it informs other young people about funding possibilities. Furthermore, the organisation has already received EU funding for several years and carried out several projects before, including previous European Youth Weeks.

According to Michał Braun, in many projects, experienced adults hire inexperienced young people for the project’s realisation. The centre, in contrast, involved young people in the process of organising the European Youth Week from the very beginning. While it was one of many projects for the organisation, it was the first project of its kind for most of the young people. All of the volunteers as well as the main organiser were teenagers who received help from experienced volunteers in all stages. The centre invited the most experienced and active volunteers to prepare the project funding to give them the opportunity to start their own project. All working packages were, therefore, developed by or with young people. They came up with an idea, wrote the description, and inserted it in the application format.

While the application form was written in English, project activities of the centre were carried out in Polish. The centre involved some international volunteers and discussed with them in English. However, in most parts the project was Polish and local in its character.

At the beginning of the project, the organisers built some tents on the main square of the city and in the city park, where they set up flip chart papers with questions regarding the city. People could come and answer questions, for example: What are the things I would like to change in my city? What are the things that bother me? Or what are the opportunities that I like in the city?<sup>2</sup> They wrote their answers down on pieces of paper, and then the volunteers summarised them in a consultation report. They chose the most important topics, like education or city transportation.

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<sup>2</sup>See Pictures of the project at <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2463369573697839&set=pcb.2483493414994014>

The centre additionally organised debates. One frequently mentioned issue was that public transportation does not meet the needs of the young people in the region. The coordinator and the volunteers, therefore, invited people who are responsible for public transportation in the city to enter into a discussion. As shown in this example, topics that are important for the residents of the city were debated in public. After five consultations, the centre also invited schools to take part in the project. From every debate, the organisation's team of young people made a recommendation that they could use in the final debate. This final debate was to discuss how current problems, such as public transportation, could actually change to better meet the needs of the citizens of Kielce.

Finally, the centre organised an event to present the final results of the consultations to the city councillors and city decision-makers. Furthermore, it invited other NGOs that offer something for young people and organised an event in the city park. Each NGO that was present had a booth. The young people could visit them and get information about possibilities for participation. There were also a few outdoor activities.

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#### **4 Outcomes: New Perspectives and Changed Minds**

In general, the organisation concludes that most project goals were achieved. It estimates that approximately one hundred people took part in the discussions, and around five hundred people got involved in the project in total, for example, by participating in dialogues in public places. These participants got the chance to discuss relevant issues, get new information and perspectives, and possibly change their minds. The aim to reach young people was fulfilled, especially because the young people were directly involved in the project's development and organisation. In contrast to adults, it was easy for these young people to reach their friends, classmates, and people from their schools by posting information on social media.

In addition to raising public awareness and reaching particular audiences, an important outcome was improving the capacities and competences of the young people directly involved in the project's development and management. Since they were involved at every stage, they learned a lot, including how to plan and realise a project and how to mobilise funding. They surprised many with their high competence despite their young age, and they became the best ambassadors of the programme. Therefore, the organisation stresses the importance of investing in and engaging potential young leaders so that other young people will follow.

It seems that the project has also resulted in a change of minds within the organisation's team, although such an effect usually takes some time and is, therefore, mostly caused by several projects and not just one. There was, for example, a young man with nationalistic views involved in several projects. Over the course of those projects, he made some friends from other countries.

And after these projects, we had a lot of debates with him. And then he said, okay, maybe you are right and maybe I should study more. And what he did—imagine, this really

nationalistic guy—he started studying Arabic studies in UK. And like last year, he went for holidays to Jordan to spend some time with these religious leaders and now he is setting up an NGO that aims to work against radicalisation of young people.

Outside the project team, the impact of the project work was not immediately visible in the sense of being able to demonstrate a change caused by the project alone. There was no visible policy change, but an indirect and sustainable empowerment. As Michał Braun put it, “If you make it on the local level and you have young people who say, we want to have a youth councillor or we want to have an additional bus [. . .]. And the city is making this bus run. Then you can really start believing that your voice matters.” Such experiences can make young people really start to believe in themselves and that they can change something. If they believe in their own ability to make a difference—social scientists discuss this experience under the term “political efficacy”—they can better support any project and become more interested and engaged in European politics.

Thus, success means also laying the groundwork for further activities. The organisation plans projects for the future, which are mostly about meeting young people, decision-makers, and providing debates. The people involved in the described project have the expertise to actively support these plans. Moreover, they can use their expertise in other sectors. Students who participated in the centre’s projects and later studied got well-paid jobs in a short time.

In sum, the results and achievements should not be measured for the project term alone but also include later long-term effects. However, the long-term effects never work alone, but in the context of other factors.

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## **5 Success Factors: Flexibility, Networking, and Visible Results**

The experience with the European Youth Week suggests that the success factors for projects on EU citizenship and other projects related to Europe and youth include flexibility, networking, expertise, involving the target group, a mixture of practical local and more complex European issues, transnational perspectives, and resources for different activities.

The case of the European Youth Week shows that being successful does not mean sticking strictly to the original project plan. During organisation, the centre was forced to be flexible and change some aspects. For example, a certain number of participants had been expected, but in fact sometimes more or less people came. For the most part, the centre realised what was previously planned in the application form, but it was necessary to react spontaneously in some situations. Nevertheless, the goals were mostly achieved.

The analysis of the case makes clear that being part of an EU-related network and regularly carrying out different EU-related projects and tasks strengthens the prospect for carrying out new projects successfully and for getting new funding. The reason is that the respective actors have better access to information, increase their

expertise and experience, and know who to contact (both at the local and European level) to organise interesting events. Expertise also means organisational learning and transferring existing knowledge systematically to new project members.

As the Regional Volunteer Centre stresses, involving the target group is also a crucial success factor. The European Youth Week shows that the key to organising youth projects is not to hand over a project from adults to young people but to involve them at every stage of the project. In the NGO sector, young people easily develop a sense of responsibility and can very quickly be involved in quite responsible tasks, like budgeting and organising activities, given that good supervision by experienced people is ensured. According to Michał Braun, it is important to give them tasks, trust, support, and guidance so that they can really make a change in their lives and in their communities as well.

The organisation also feels that a mixture of local and European issues is necessary. For successful consultations, it seems important that they meet the interests of the people and that their participation can really make a difference. The experience of many youth projects has shown that sometimes even a small policy change is a success, e.g. to have a youth councillor or an additional night bus. A purely “theoretical” discussion, in contrast, can be depressing and demotivating for young people. That is why the centre pleads for European projects at the local level. The work and structures at the European level are very complex. Therefore, in Brussels, young people could only watch lengthy decision-making processes with many actors and could not participate and present their own ideas. It takes too long for the discussed issues to be implemented. For some people, meeting important EU personalities could be motivating, but at local events, they can easily make a difference.

Since combining local and EU affairs is not always possible in single projects and reaching effects requires continuous work, the centre also pleads for a continuous mixture of different measures. In the organisation, for example, some people are active at the local level but are not interested in European matters. On the other hand, there are people who are very much into European affairs, but not into their closest community. Bringing local and EU issues together, therefore, helps to reach both types of people.

Beyond the European Youth Week, the centre strongly believes in the relevance of cross-border projects like youth exchanges, international camps, or training courses. Young people should go abroad and meet people from other countries and learn from each other. After that, they could share their experience and the skills they learned abroad with peers in their hometown communities so that their stays abroad can have a long-term effect at the local level. Being abroad for a couple of weeks or months also strengthens proficiency in English, which in itself is important for European issues. That would be especially effective in the region, where young people, according to Michał Braun, generally do not speak English very well.

To realise this ideal approach, resources and public funding are necessary and success factors in themselves. This also includes awareness of already-existing funding possibilities.

## 6 Problems for Reaching all Young People

In their work with youth and EU projects, the Regional Volunteer Centre in Kielce identified several problems, including budget, accessibility of information, reluctance of teachers to cooperate, and an imbalance in youth participation.

Regarding the action programme of the European Youth Week, with its different debates and events for young people, the budget was rather low. The centre got a sum of 9180 euros to implement the project. The coordinator was not a volunteer and got paid for it, but as previously mentioned, there were also many volunteers involved in the project. The EU funding was more like an assignment to organise projects. Money was invested for training rooms, catering, workshops for young people, and hiring trainers. Furthermore, material and office supplies were bought, like a tent for outdoor activities, paper, pens, and copywriters. All in all, there was enough money to pay the trainers and for some advertisements, as well as to cover the costs of training rooms, but not enough to cover structural costs to ensure the basic infrastructure and staff needed to uphold the organisation. At the same time, the funders are described as being quite open and up to date with the issues that are funded. Erasmus+ is regarded as less bureaucratic and easier to manage than previous funding schemes.

Another problem already mentioned is that single projects are not capable of promoting themselves, and actors who just start to engage in EU issues lack information about funding possibilities. Even though Erasmus+ offers a lot of different programmes for young people and the EU is generally interested in the opinion of the organisers, access to EU funding is complicated and, therefore, difficult to reach for young people, which is especially relevant for this target group. According to the centre, an overarching aim should be that the EU improves its approaches to reaching out to more young people. If there were a possibility to change something about the Erasmus+ programme, it would be to provide more resources for promoting it, because many young people are not aware of their possibilities in the EU. The European Commission should invest in paid advertising on the internet, TV spots, or more presence on social media, for example, YouTube advertising, which is not that expensive. At the same time, members of the organisation are housed in expensive hotels during projects funded by the EU. The centre would prefer to get housed in cheaper hotels and use this money to promote the programme instead. Programme-related websites should be more colourful, with more pictures and very simple instructions.

The organisation additionally suggests paid employees for the Eurodesk. The Eurodesk, as mentioned, is the main European information network, but it is based on voluntary work. The organisation is supposed to deliver twenty hours of consultancy per week, but it does not have any money to hire somebody only for that task.

Furthermore, one problem is that organisations have to cooperate with schools, and often the teachers do not advocate the involvement of their students as they do not see the advantages. Due to the generational gap between teachers and students, many teachers also do not know about the possibilities of EU projects. According to the interviewed project leader, there is also a latent clash between the equal-partner approach to young people used by the centre and the “teacher approach”. While the

centre's project aim was to listen to and empower young people, teachers often think that they know best what is suitable for young people. Most young people enjoy working with the organisation, and teachers might fear a delegitimisation of their own approach.

Another more general and practical problem is that the same group of young people is involved in many projects, while the biggest group of young people is not involved in any project. It is difficult to find those who are not yet active and to convince them to get involved.

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## 7 Conclusion and Outlook. European Values Are Essential

The organisation's commitment to European issues and youth work has not ended with the end of the project. It expects to grow in the next 10 years, employing more staff and volunteers and carrying out new projects. It especially wants to reach out to more young people, and it wants every young person to know about the programme, so that they can travel and meet other people as an overarching aim.

According to the organisers, the lasting effects of the project are people who are more open-minded, more mobile, more tolerant, and more respectful and who are more likely to engage in their local communities. To improve the long-term effect of the EU projects for young people, the organisation considers it particularly important to reach out to more people, which is actually the main problem.

As the organisation underlines, people interested in EU youth work should approach experienced players. They are happy to share their knowledge with others. Besides, it is important to get engaged in one of the NGOs to have a permanent organisational basis. Planning and realising projects can be very complex; they require experience and take time to learn. But according to the centre, the work with young people in the EU is very interesting and rewarding.

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# Initiating a Structured Dialogue between Local Youth and Decision-Makers: The Mińsk Mazowiecki Youth Forum

Luca Gawron and Lena Elisa Penzlin

## 1 Introduction

The project *Youth Forum* was carried out in the town of Mińsk Mazowiecki, Poland. Its main objective was to involve young people in democratic activities in their everyday lives and to initiate their active involvement in the local community, which was absent before. The organisers hoped that it would help to establish a formal youth policy strategy for Mińsk Mazowiecki. Around forty young people aged between twelve and sixteen participated, most of them members of youth councils.

The project was organised by the Foundation for Intercultural Development EBU (Fundacja Rozwoju Międzykulturowego EBU, or in short Fundacja EBU). This foundation is run by volunteers and specialises in intercultural education and dialogue. It was founded in 2006 by Eliza Bujalska<sup>1</sup> in Mińsk Mazowiecki, around fifty kilometres east of the capital Warsaw. The main aims of its work are to educate, to increase awareness for other cultures by promoting tolerance, to initiate intercultural dialogue by connecting people of different origins, and to increase everyone's understanding and awareness of their own culture and personality.

To achieve these goals, the foundation generally works on the promotion of volunteering abroad, on training and developing social skills, and it uses additional learning methods, such as non-formal education. It also functions as a Eurodesk Information Point to provide information about intercultural exchanges, universities in Europe, and volunteering opportunities. Besides, there are many different projects and activities, targeted at the entire local community or tailored to individual age

<sup>1</sup>The article is mainly based on an interview with Eliza Bujalska on 26 July 2022. As of 7 September 2020, she was appointed to the position of Second Deputy Mayor of Mińsk Mazowiecki. However, she continued the organization of projects, especially in the field of youth, on a voluntary basis.

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groups, that are carried out by the organisation. Examples are intercultural meetings and events, volunteering projects as well as international and local youth projects. Fundacja EBU cooperates with several local institutions such as the city hall, the palace of culture, and local libraries.

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## 2 The General, Local, and Regional Environment

In recent years, the quality of Poland's democracy has dramatically decreased. Under the rule of the right-wing authoritarian Party of Law and Justice (PiS), the independence of the judiciary and the press are being undermined, resulting in weakened accountability mechanisms (Bernhard 2021). As a result, Poland can be described as a "competitive authoritarian regime" (see p.52ff in Levitsky and Way 2002). While Poland has been regarded as a poster child of the EU integration process, and while the EU enjoys a "relatively high approval rating amongst Polish citizens", Eurosceptic parties thrive (Downes and Wong 2021). The dominance of the PiS party generally reflects religious Catholic, anti-LGBTQI+, and anti-immigrant positions amongst Polish society (ibid). However, there is also opposition to government policy. The PiS party faces resistance from civil society and lost its majority in the Senate—one of the two chambers of the Polish parliament—to the opposition in the 2019 elections (Bernhard 2021).

Economically, Poland's GDP is, on the one hand, at the lower end of the range for EU countries and below the OECD average. On the other hand, it had one of the lowest male youth unemployment rates in the EU in 2019, and average female youth unemployment rates, but respectively these 9.6% and 10.3% unemployment rates are still far from full employment (OECD 2022a, b).

According to the project organiser, young people in Mińsk Mazowiecki are alienated from national politics, which is manifested in the feeling of not being heard by politicians. Besides, these young people are described as lacking future prospects, facing problems like climate change or mental health issues which emerged during the SARS-Covid pandemic. The ties to the EU are not perceived as strong. EU related projects, youth centres, or youth workers are still rare in Poland. As a result, Fundacja EBU aimed to create ties between the EU and youth.

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## 3 The Project

The project *Youth Forum* started in July 2019 and ended in March 2020. As mentioned, its main objective was to initiate a structured dialogue between local youth and several decision-makers. Besides this, the project aimed at raising the awareness of the youth in Mińsk Mazowiecki for democratic values and practices in different social environments, like the home, school, and society in general, and at improving knowledge about democratic processes in terms of decision-making processes and the implications of certain decisions.

Thus, the project resembled other projects carried out by Fundacja EBU and aimed at conducting dialogue, for example, through the establishment of youth councils consisting of elected student representatives from each school in the city. At the same time, *Youth Forum* was the first project that directly aimed at bringing young people together with local decision-makers and experts, such as administration representatives, directors of schools and cultural institutions, to discuss the concerns of youth in the city.

As mentioned above, Fundacja EBU had already conducted various EU youth projects before. EU funding is an important source which allows the organisation to be financially independent from the city hall of Mińsk Mazowiecki. Because of its function as a Eurodesk Information Point and its experienced staff, the organisation already had excellent access to information about EU funding and was able to apply on its own. The project was funded by Erasmus+ and totalled 11,696 Euro. Since most of the organisers are working on a voluntary basis, most of the money went into the preparation and staging of the different events.

Since Fundacja EBU is a well-established organisation in Mińsk Mazowiecki, they already had connections with many key players in the city whom they could approach when organising the *Youth Forum*. Overall, around twenty-five decision-makers and experts participated. The young people participating were recruited from the youth councils. By opting for this selection of young people, the organisers wanted to increase awareness of how representative democracy functions: *Youth Forum* participants were elected by their fellow students to represent their concerns, and so it was up to them to take these concerns to other audiences.

To realise the above-mentioned objectives, the foundation organised various activities and some major events. For example, it offered meetings and workshops to prepare young people to meet with the decision-makers, followed by a conference and different panel discussions where the young people and the decision-makers got in touch and talked about the youth's concerns. In the end, there was a closing meeting with the mayor and a presentation of the results of the project, followed by workshops for all young people from the city to disseminate the results of the conference.

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## 4 Outcomes

According to the project organiser, the project was successful as it induced a specific change in Mińsk Mazowiecki: While decision-makers had not treated youth as a significant social group before, during the project they came together as equal partners. The *Youth Forum* allowed both groups to get to know each other, to start a relationship, and to notice the importance of listening to each other.

The organisers had the impression that the project managed to create a feeling of equality between the local decision-makers and young people that might be favourable for their future relationships. Initially, the exchange revealed the many stereotypes both groups had. The decision-makers considered young people as careless and not interested in politics, while the young people thought of politicians

and experts as formal people they could never talk to. To challenge and decrease these stereotypes, it was crucial to plan the different activities and events in detail. Regarding the first meeting between the young people and the decision-makers, called a “banquet”, this meant, for example, involving the young people in the entire process of planning to make them feel like it is their meeting. The organisers let them choose the whole meeting environment, for example, in terms of the dress code or shared language, so they could feel confident.

Moreover, the groups discussed many important topics regarding youth, including the things the city has to offer young people, and the needs that are not being met yet. The participants also talked about specific solutions. An important aspect of this was to talk about places and space for young people in the city. In the end, the young people created several recommendations about issues that are important for young people in the city, about the need for action, and proposed topics they would like to continue speaking to the city about after the project ended. Important outcomes were recommendations for the culture department and the formulation of the need for a place in the city that they could use for their interests, like a youth centre. These recommendations were of great importance for further action.

In addition, the young participants and the politicians jointly prepared a declaration at the end of the *Youth Forum* expressing the decision-makers’ and experts’ intention to keep in touch with the young people after the termination of the project. So even if the project did not produce a strategic document on youth policy in Mińsk Mazowiecki as the organisers had previously hoped, this agreement laid the foundation to do so in the future.

After the project, it became clear that the decision-makers embraced the idea of integrating youth into their decisions and knew where to reach the young people, for example, through the student councils or the newly created youth centre in the city. The youth centre in Mińsk Mazowiecki, which opened in 2021, was almost entirely organised by young people who received support from Fundacja EBU. This suggests that the involved students also gained experience by participating in the project and felt encouraged to take the initiative themselves. In the *Youth Forum*, the need for a place for young people had already come up. Building on this, it was easier to talk about the subject later with the mayor and the city council.

According to the project organiser, despite these positive outcomes, the town still lacks a strategy on youth policy. Fundacja EBU considers such a strategy crucial for the continuous consideration of youth needs in local politics as it is more binding and gives a guideline for decision-makers. In order to achieve that, the organisation continued to encourage youth participation with a new project called *Youth Lab* which aims specifically at creating a strategic document on youth policy for Mińsk Mazowiecki.

## 5 Success Factors

Based on their work, the organisation identified several success factors for youth participation projects. They include choosing a motivated target group, offering interesting events, working with trained and experienced staff, finding the right balance between project organisation by its staff and the involvement of the young people, embedding the project in a general, long-term agenda, and using this agenda evaluating the projects.

Often, young people need a driving motivation to engage in participation projects. A success factor of the *Youth Forum* project was to build on the young people who were already actively taking part in civil society. Since participation is dependent on motivated participants, a student council was a suitable place to recruit people for the project. These students already had some experience in either representing their peers or discussing together, which was a solid foundation for *Youth Forum*. Additionally, Fundacja EBU could easily contact those students who were already organised.

The young participants were especially motivated by the chance to talk to the mayor, officials, and other decision-makers. The possibility to meet decision-makers, who usually would seem out of reach for the youth, provided the students with a direct channel to discuss their needs and wishes with those responsible for policy making. This shows that inviting political actors can enhance participation although local officials may be enough to convince the youth to be a part of the project. The project organisers believe that youth participation projects funded by the EU do not necessarily have to invite decision-makers and officials from Brussels to be interesting for the young participants.

Another success factor was the trained and experienced staff of Fundacja EBU. Since youth participation is a large and challenging topic, it can be tough for new organisations to plan events or to develop best practices. Having staff who have been engaged in similar projects increases the chances of successful projects and requires less time. Also, people with a good reputation in the context of youth participation will more successfully apply for EU funding and manage the project. The organisers suggest that new teams planning youth participation programs get in touch with other organisations to receive information on how to design a project, how to approach young people, and how to receive funding.

This experience helped in deciding when to involve the young people into the planning process. The project organisers argue that youth participation processes thrive when there is a good balance between the engagement of the project organisation and participants, with young people helping in organising events while the organisation has elaborate ideas on how to do projects. The Fundacja EBU got in touch with politicians and created the events and a long-term agenda. With the project *Youth Forum*, it started to involve the students in the more detailed planning, for example, during the planning phase of the above-mentioned banquet with decision-makers, which was helpful for getting them trained.

For Fundacja EBU, another success factor for doing the project was to develop a long-term plan for youth participation. In this sense, the *Youth Forum* was one part

of a broader agenda and allowed the organisation to make small steps ahead. This way, the expectations of the participants could be managed properly, and the “small” achievements like breaking stereotypes could be fulfilled. Secondly, local administrations need time to plan and fulfil the wishes of the youth, and participation projects need to adjust to the pace of the administration and the schedule of decision-makers. Finally, youth participation can only be successful if it is sustainable and always open to new participants. For participation projects to stay on track, they need a foundation on which future projects can rely.

To design such a long-term agenda, the organisation considers it vital to measure the success of the individual projects. The success of the *Youth Forum* was assessed in light of its formulated aims. Since Fundacja EBU wanted to eradicate prejudices between the youth and officials, they talked to the participants after the event to evaluate whether this goal had been achieved. Both groups reported that they were surprised by their counterparts and that the decision-makers from the administration wanted to reach out to young people more frequently. Fundacja EBU can build on this foundation to continue with a more detailed and focused dialogue about the needs of the youth.

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## 6 Problems and Wishes

According to Fundacja EBU, some problems occurred during the planning and implementation phases. They included the mobilisation of decision-makers, ensuring their serious commitment to the subjects of the dialogue, and keeping up the long-term motivation of young people to engage in the project.

The organisation reports that a first hurdle for the *Youth Forum* project was to convince the decision-makers and officials to participate in a structured dialogue with the local students. While prejudices existed on both sides, especially decision-makers and officials were reluctant, as they were sceptical about the benefits of talking to young people. This problem was reinforced by the fact that the *Youth Forum* was the first attempt to create a structured dialogue between the youth and officials. To tackle this challenge, Fundacja EBU used EU guidelines to emphasize the importance of youth participation in order to convince the local decision-makers. Besides, they relied on the staff of cultural institutions who wanted to get in touch with the youth, especially the mayor of Mińsk Mazowiecki, to convince other decision-makers to participate.

The biggest problem mentioned by the organisation is that there is no guarantee that the involved decision-makers or officials will treat the propositions made by the youth seriously. While final declarations are being forged by the participants, many ideas may not be transformed into policies, will be delegated to departments of the city hall to avoid responsibility, or will remain ignored. Fundacja EBU tried to avoid this by creating a level playing field which included informal language and casual dress codes during the banquet. However, it turned out to be difficult to establish “authentic” cooperation and dialogue between the youth and older generations without prejudices and to allow the ideas and propositions of the young people to

carry weight. This is because many factors, such as finding a common language, are out of the control of the organisation and require cooperation between the participants.

Another instrument to tackle this problem and to increase the chance of making a political impact used by the project organisers was to prepare strategic final documents. They could serve as a guideline for decision-makers and officials, who often are not aware of the needs of young people. With the documents at hand, they do not have to get creative on their own, but they can simply identify the demands of the youth. Regarding youth participation, the young people transformed their ideas into practical demands and measures. The decision-makers were also involved in designing this paper to ensure that the ideas of the youth can be fulfilled. However, while this can help to mitigate the above-mentioned problem, another problem arises: formulating a strategic document may not be exciting for young people, and they can lose interest in the project.

The project organisers also struggled with the problem of ensuring the long-term motivation of young people, which is interlinked with the difficulty of making decision-makers available. Despite the initial interest of the young people, it was a challenge to keep up their motivation over the course of a longer time period, which clashes with the time schedules of decision-makers who often demand long-term planning. This includes scheduling meetings and having patience since political processes tend to be slow. To keep up the motivation of the teenagers and to schedule meetings with decision-makers with an extended workload, a balance needs to be achieved. However, the group of young people involved constantly changed because of their changing interests or because they finished studying at school in Mińsk Mazowiecki and moved to other towns. Thus, organisations need to be flexible in this regard.

According to Eliza Bujalska from the foundation, the EU could help to cope with such difficulties in organising youth participation. She demands that first, the EU budgets for organisations should be higher since this would give organisations more independence and freedom during the planning phase. Secondly, she argues that the EU needs a specific agenda on youth participation at the local level. Since youth work in EU member states like Poland is still “underground work” and this topic is being pushed aside, the EU can appeal to governments and municipalities to put an emphasis on youth participation. EU guidelines could thus put pressure on officials to organise youth dialogues or establish a closer relationship with young people.

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## 7 Conclusion

Especially in times of rising right-wing populism, which has already manifested itself in the Polish government, organisations like Fundacja EBU are important in building up a young and democratic civil society. The lessons from the project described here, however, show that this is a lengthy process. Projects like the *Youth Forum* only lay the foundation since their primary function was to accomplish an initial dialogue between the youth and local decision-makers and to erase prejudices.

Follow-up projects such as the creation of a youth centre or *Youth Lab* can build on this foundation. Since 2021, Fundacja EBU has also become a Europe Direct Point reporting on the structure, priorities, and policies of the EU. This includes workshops on the values the European Union is committed to. Different projects and measures like these are elements of a broader strategy used to enhance democracy in Europe.

As a result, organisations with a focus on youth participation need to plan with a long-term perspective. According to the foundation, the EU could help in this regard with more specific strategy papers and appeals to local governments to increase the relevance of youth participation. Besides this, it recommends cooperation between younger and more experienced organisations to overcome difficult starting conditions. Despite the hurdles and challenges involved in youth participation projects, Eliza Bujalska from the project organisation has continuously emphasised the importance of such projects and encouraged others to build up their own organisations and youth projects since this is highly rewarding.

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# A Building Block of an Overall Strategy for Political Education: *Decide on Europe*

Amaliia Tadzhetdinova and Grete Gutzer

## 1 Introduction

*Decide on Europe – Become a European Policy Maker for a Day* was an EU-related youth project with project activities and participants in the Czech Republic and Slovakia funded by Erasmus+ between 2019 and 2021. It was part of a series of similar projects, which started in 2008, and since then was carried out several times in a similar way with a changing thematic focus. By organising youth meetings, one-day interactive seminars in the regions, a simulation of EU institution meetings and a conference for secondary school students from all types of schools, the project aimed to promote dialogue between young people in both countries on European topics, as well as their dialogue with decision-makers and experts (EUTIS 2022).

The main organiser of the project was a Czech non-profit organisation called EUTIS, which was founded by a group of young students 1 year after the Czech Republic joined the European Union in 2004. The founders were mainly students of political sciences and European studies. They had a feeling that many Czech citizens do not know about the European Union and what it means to be a part of it.<sup>1</sup> The main aim of founding this organisation, therefore, was to inform young people about the EU, to help them becoming active and to engage them in EU-centred debates. Later, they started working with students at schools and universities, as well as teachers as their new, main target group.

The project described here mainly concentrated on the European Union and its institutions but also aimed at the telling and teaching of modern history, educating people about nationalism and supporting active citizenship. Thus, it was part of the

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<sup>1</sup>This report is based, in particular, on information from an interview with Michael Murad on 13 June and 17 June 2022.

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overall strategy of EUTIS to provide political and historical education. In the meantime, the organisation has become a key player in this field, with a high degree of professionalisation and access to networks and European funding.

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## 2 General Local and Regional Environment

In both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, politics and politicians in general are not perceived positively and are often associated with corruption and injustice (European Commission 2022). While more people in Slovakia see the European Union in a positive light, Czech people are more Eurosceptic. This has changed slightly after Russia's invasion into Ukraine. According to Michael Murad, who conducted many surveys together with his team, about 50 per cent of the population support the Czech Republic's membership in the EU (Anders and Lorenz 2020).<sup>2</sup> Assuming that this is related to a lack of information, the project team sought to engage more people with European membership issues.

Unemployment amongst young people is not a big issue for the Czech Republic, as it has the lowest unemployment rate in the European Union, as well as the lowest unemployment rate amongst young people. The situation is much more complicated and diverse in Slovakia, especially in its eastern regions (The World Bank 2022).

According to EUTIS, due to a large number of ongoing projects, access to information concerning EU-related issues and projects is much easier in Prague or Bratislava than in small towns. Though the European Union is a topic in the curricula of both countries, schools are not always supportive, especially in rural regions, in providing access to EU events and projects. To some extent, this can be attributed to individual schools because the education systems of the Czech Republic and Slovakia are highly decentralised. Especially educational institutions with large numbers of students from low-income families are under daily stress and less involved in project activities. The interviewed organisation also reports that it is quite difficult to reach students in rural regions because their overall satisfaction with their own lives and their opportunities are not as high as the opportunities available to students living in cities. Quite successful projects, run by the Representative Offices of the European Commission in Prague and Bratislava, involve hundreds of pupils or secondary school students every year. Regional initiatives held all around the country, in contrast, have quite a low impact, but they contribute to increasing students' interest in such projects.

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<sup>2</sup>For data in trust in the EU, see the regular Eurobarometer data and p. 6 in Anders, Lisa H. and Lorenz, Astrid. 2020. Examining Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe from a Domestic Perspective: State of Research and Outline of the Book. In *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe*, eds. Astrid Lorenz and Lisa H. Anders, 1–24. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

### 3 The Project

The project *Decide on Europe* focused not only on those who are already active in project activities but also on students who are not involved in existing European initiatives. It aimed at demonstrating to the participants what the EU is like and what it means to be a European policymaker for 1 day. The project was specifically designed for high school students from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The seminars consisted of two parts: one was a simulation of meetings of the European Council and the European Parliament and the other a debate with politicians, experts and other public figures. These regional seminars were followed by a 3-day model meeting of the EU institutions, to which important EU politicians from the Czech Republic and Slovakia were invited. Furthermore, there were many partners involved, for example, the Centre for European Policy, Departments of Political Science, the Czech Republic Representation of the European Commission and the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

The project's main objective was to involve young people in debates and to give them a feeling of being heard. They were offered space where they could freely express their ideas and themselves and where they could talk with decision-makers and politicians. The organisers considered it very important not to design the project as a competition with prizes for the winners but to create an inclusive project where everyone can have their own experiences and achievements. The project was supposed to activate students and help them to decide on their future. To enable participants to engage in the dialogues, one goal of the project was to provide young people with the competence they need, teach them the basics about EU institutions and show them that they do not have to hesitate to express their opinions and thoughts. The organisation did not support any particular political figure or party.

When planning the project and applying for funding, the organisers benefited from their expertise from previous projects funded by Erasmus. They already had many contacts and connections with key persons and could cooperate with them. Most of them are working in the field of civic education and EU rights. Many members are working on several projects at once, all of which are EU-funded, so it felt logical for them to apply for this specific one as well. The application process was mainly carried out by the organisers of the Czech project and became transnational when the project started to involve the Slovakian partners. The amount of funding was about €45,000 and was used for staff, travel costs and investments for the project. Investments were, for example, the rental costs for rooms in which the projects took place or accommodation costs for guests who were invited to participate in the seminars.

The experienced team already knew how to effectively attract a large number of participants. One way of disseminating information about the project to possible participants was to use an open call, but the students usually received information about the project from schools. Therefore, the close cooperation with schools, but also with representatives from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, played a crucial role. The organisers have many contacts especially around the Czech Republic to teachers who knew the idea of the EUTIS project from the past and supported it.

According to EUTIS, the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic and the Representative Office of the European Commission in Prague were especially helpful in structuring the dialogue and carrying out this project. In Slovakia, the main partners were the Slovak Foreign Policy Association and the Representative Office of the European Commission in Bratislava. The project was also realised, thanks to the support of Europe Direct in Czech Republic, the Centre of Foreign Cooperation, the Centre for European Policy (Bratislava), the National Working Group for Structured Dialogue with Youth and the Czech Republic's Eurodesk.

Since the project format had been carried out several times since 2007, the organisers could rely on their experience and develop a realistic project plan. During the project, there was no need to deviate from the set plan, and everything took place as planned.

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## 4 Outcomes

The project developed into one of the biggest projects in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, with seminars and meetings being held almost everywhere and with hundreds of participants. In total, 1000 students from both countries took part in the pre-COVID-19 period. Important politicians and members of the European Parliament and the European Commission spoke to the students. The organisers were able to involve students from many new schools they had not been able to reach before. Hence, the organisation reports that the aim to give many students the possibility to gain knowledge about European politics, to develop competence and to get into contact with decision-makers and experts was fully accomplished. Project participants learned how to express their opinion on political issues that they had not discussed before. Through the various workshops and events, they received new information and insights as well as access to decision-makers that they would not have met without the project.

After the completion of the project, the project team reported on the outcomes, not only for Erasmus+, but also for the regional partners. It invited the representatives of the national agencies, as well as the members of the European Parliament to participate in project activities, including the Czech Commissioner. It also tried to maintain contact with participants to see their progress, which turned out to be easy in most cases. Participants from previous years were still very interested in EU-related projects and involved in many cross-national initiatives. Many of them reported that participation in the project was something that activated them; raised and increased their interest in politics, the European Union and international relations; and helped them choose their field of studies when finishing school and choosing their future careers. In the meantime, many of these students are working in important positions, for example, for their regional governments.

EUTIS perceives both the successful realisation of the planned workshops and events and the long-term effects as the project's main achievements. For the short-term outcomes, the project team carried out many evaluations amongst participants and received feedback from schools, to estimate the effects of the work conducted.

As long-term effects, participants have gained experience that has enabled them to be more involved in volunteering and active citizenship and to be engaged in politics. The lasting engagement of the participants with the topics after the termination of the project, as well as the participants' motivation to stay active and to make a change, is something the organisers interpret as an important outcome.

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## 5 Success Factors

The described project and previous projects of EUTIS suggest that the success factors for carrying out EU-related education projects include a clear focus on a particular target group, having experience and an established network, combining EU politics with local issues or a local perspective and transnational cooperation.

According to EUTIS, a factor contributing to the success of the project was its orientation toward secondary school students and the adaptation of the main project idea to this target group. It was easier to incorporate the project into their schedules compared to other possible target groups. The project took place over the course of a school year, starting in September and ending in January, and was planned to match the age and maturity of the participating students. According to the organisers, not pressuring but guiding the students was important to encourage them to express their political opinions, especially because speaking about politics is not common in Czech and Slovak schools. For the dialogues, smaller groups were formed, which helped the students to express themselves and made them less hesitant.

The clear focus on the secondary school students also helped to identify and develop a format which is appealing for particularly this target group. Dialogue with decision-makers and the possibility to learn how it feels when your voice is counted is another point that motivated students to take part and be active in the project. Moreover, the organisers felt that this is not just important for the target group but for Europe too. It needs students who are motivated and want to change something.

The existing project expertise and the established network based on previous projects also contributed in putting the project aims into effect in an environment where support by schools for EU-related projects is not the rule. Since the project format was already well established and well known by teachers, many schools were willing to participate again. Under such conditions, it was possible to adjust the school's curriculum to the project, allowing students to participate. Other project partners, including politicians and experts, were also aware of the project and willing to participate again. The established team and network structure increased efficiency and facilitated a commitment to the project aims. Everyone worked together to eliminate obstacles and make the project accessible for students.

The expertise and networks also enabled the team to adapt the project easily to changing political developments to show what is relevant at the moment, to try to incorporate innovative methods and to monitor new or changing funding options. The last phase of the project, for example, was included in the Conference on the Future of Europe. With a basic set of cooperation partners, the organisers could concentrate their forces on mobilising new ones, like in the described project, where

many new schools could be reached. Under such conditions, a flexible expansion of project activities becomes easier and less costly.

Combining EU politics with local issues or a local perspective was also important. For now, the project is focusing on regional and local topics and is trying to connect them with EU topics to offer the participants added value. It helps them to process the newly learned EU-related topics and to think more about the European Union, even if it is far away from young people's personal lives. Thus, the project successfully combined regional topics and bigger EU narratives and supported this by allowing the participants to talk to politicians and decision-makers. Previous runs of the project had shown that inviting local politicians and local members of the European Union is a little more efficient than bringing in the 'big names'. It can work to bring in the 'big names', but the participants usually feel a closer connection to people from their own countries.

It is also important to recognise that meeting politicians and members of the European Parliament is not the primary focus of many participating students. According to EUTIS' experience, they were instead keener on learning something new and meeting other people of their own age, who are interested in the topics as well. In this particular project, students were able to meet students from another country, as the Czech Republic and Slovakia worked on this together. As the organisers report, the meetings with the numerous young participants were great events that increased the students' motivation and made the project even more successful.

The organisers think that explicit cross-border projects can be motivational because they allow students to enter into dialogue with their peers from other countries, backgrounds and cultures. The described project was carried out in two languages—Czech and Slovak. Since both languages are relatively close to each other, this was no problem. EUTIS supposes that English might be a higher barrier for the students but not for the organisers who have already implemented project activities in English.

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## 6 Problems and Wishes

Problems faced in the project and similar projects conducted by EUTIS include a socially unbalanced interest in EU issues and reluctance especially from vocational schools in rural areas to cooperate, as well as funding.

According to the organisation, the first obstacle for EU-related projects and events is that the participants tend to represent a more or less homogeneous group of university students or young people in the capitals or larger cities. In a sense, this makes such events less efficient in terms of political education because this group already has a substantial degree of knowledge about the European Union and participation in EU affairs. Therefore, EUTIS wanted to engage new people in the described project. This, however, means leaving the capitals or big cities (where EU-focused organisations are often located) for seminars and meetings also in the

rural regions. This is cheaper for high school students, who do not have money to travel long distances, but more costly for the organisation carrying out the project.

The project team had actively decided to focus on those people, who were not yet involved in the projects and active citizenship. They tried to aim not only at secondary schools and universities but also at professional schools from rural regions. However, at this step, the organisers faced several obstacles because teachers did not want young people to participate in such projects. The main reasons according to the organisation were confusing political education with politics and a rather negative image of the European Union. Some of the principals refused the participation of their students in this project because they perceived it as a kind of political project. They thought that this project was carried out with the support of a political party, which was not the case. Since politics in general is often perceived relatively negatively and linked to clientelism and corruption, dealing with European politics was perceived as potentially problematic. Though the project team tried to explain that this project is not focused on party politics but on an explanation on how the European Union works, they could not convince all principals, particularly in the Czech Republic.

Another obstacle is funding issues or funding obligations. According to EUTIS, EU-related youth work in their regions needs public funding because the organisations lack their own resources. EUTIS was quite autonomous in its decision-making and did not have to adapt strongly to EU requirements. However, it has reported that some organisations are facing challenges, for instance, Erasmus + – funded projects. The EU project obligations are quite low, but the system is quite slow. The process of getting EU funding has become easier than it was before, but it is getting more complicated for small and unexperienced organisations, especially those coming from rural regions, which makes it difficult for them to receive EU funding.

Another obstacle is that the described kind of project does not have much funding to pay for personal costs but more for consumables. However, a solid staff structure is also necessary. Therefore, organisations carrying out projects like the one described must always look for additional and future funding. This takes time that cannot be invested in working with young people, and it causes material insufficiencies, especially in smaller organisations.

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## 7 Conclusion

What the organisers are glad about is that the project is growing in terms of partnerships. Over the years, they were able to get more stable funding, enabling them to initiate even more projects and helping them to secure the organisation's future. They hope that the project will grow even bigger with many more European partners and with more young people and political figures involved. This would also mean that there can be room for innovations, so that the project can evolve and cover more topics.

As for the long-term effects, previous realisations of the project have shown that it helps to engage people, to make them politically active and to show them that their voice matters and that they can make a difference. The project, furthermore, shows students that the European Union is closer to them than it may seem, which makes them perceive it more positively. It also helps the participants to become more resilient toward populists, who try to instrumentalise the feeling that the EU is something far away. To improve the long-term effects, according to EUTIS, a big change in the national educational system would be necessary, for example, by creating classes for civic education. This would provide access to political education to a broader range of students.

EUTIS recommends others who want to work with young people in Europe to engage as much as possible, to focus on dialogue rather than monologue, to listen to people as they often have great ideas for the future, to provide them with knowledge about the systems they live in, to give them competence that helps them to express and put their ideas into effect and to help them to be more active.

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# Making Young People in Remote Rural Areas Heard: *(un)Attractive? II*

Gergő Kónya

## 1 Introduction

The project *(un)Attractive? II* was about applying a ‘structured dialogue’ as part of a broader development project in the Hungarian districts of Orosháza and Szarvas. The title of the projects alludes to the public image of rural areas as being unattractive, which, according to the organisers, fails to recognise the potential of these regions. The districts of Orosháza and Szarvas are peripheral and rural areas and located in the country’s southeast, close to the border with Romania (European Commission 2022a). The project was carried out between June 2019 and May 2020 by the Federation of Children’s and Youth Municipal Councils with the youth in the region as the main target group. This was already the second cycle of the project funded by Erasmus+. The first had a similar format but was organised in rural districts around Budapest (Gyiöt 2018).<sup>1</sup>

The Federation of Children’s and Youth Municipal Councils is a non-profit organisation based in Budapest. Founded in 1996, it aims at coordinating all local child and youth municipal councils (LCYM) in Hungary. Its main purpose is to represent the interests of all local youth governments, to give professional advice and to organise meetings and trainings for newly founded LCYMs (Salto-Youth 2022). The overall focus is to encourage youth to participate and to empower them. This is realised by applying informal learning methods within diverse programmes. While the organisation is rather small with an active core of seven people,<sup>2</sup> it cooperates

<sup>1</sup>More precisely, events took place in Biatorbágy, Budakeszi, Budaörs, Páty and Törökbálint. See: Gyiöt 2018. Project description. <https://gyiot.hu/projektek/bevonzo/>

<sup>2</sup>The report is based primarily on information from an interview with Gulyás Barnabás from the Federation of Children’s and Youth Municipal Councils on 24 June 2022.

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with several other associations and individuals. Most of its projects are based in smaller cities, with less than 35,000 inhabitants. Even though the organisation's office is located in Budapest, the projects are to a large extent realised in cooperation with local actors, mainly with the municipalities.

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## 2 General Local and Regional Environment

The context conditions for organising projects in Hungary vary strongly across the regions and also across rural areas. The areas surrounding Budapest are reasonably well connected by public transport to Hungary's capital with its 1.8 million inhabitants. Access to public transport is much more difficult in Békés county where the project was carried out. Here, the settlements are more fragmented. The biggest town is Békéscsaba with 60,000 residents.

The centrally located districts closer to Budapest have a much higher living standard (OECD 2022).<sup>3</sup> From the first cycle of the project around Budapest, the organisation reports that the people in this region were more satisfied and had less concerns regarding their lives. In the southern districts, the living standards are much lower, and unemployment rates are higher (KSH 2022). Here, people are more involved in coping with basic everyday problems. In the rural areas, particularly young people with lower education and ethnic minorities are prone to unemployment. For them it is also harder to move away. They are often employed in a state-funded public work programme, obligating them to accept work offered by the state in order to receive social benefits. In the southern part of the county, the overall number of people in this programme is over three times as high as that in the Budapest region (see p. 19 in KSH 2020).

In general, the organisation has had the impression that conversation and dialogue with the youth is not much valued in Hungary and is not established within the whole educational system. Often, basic preconditions for youth activities, like spaces for meeting and information about the possibilities of taking action, are missing. Like most Hungarians, young people in Hungary have a positive view of the EU (see pp. 7 and 22 in European Commission 2022b), but a substantial share of first-time voters supports the FIDESZ-KDNP, which frequently rails against the EU. The overall electoral turnout in the elections of the European Parliament is rather low in Hungary. In this environment, the interest of young people in politics and their participation rate are also rather weak.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>To compare the regional disparities in Hungary, see: OECD 2022. OECD Regions and Cities at a Glance 2022. <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/oecd-regions-and-cities-at-a-glance-26173212.htm>

<sup>4</sup>See on this issue the chapter of Nora Mandru and Dorottya Víg in this volume with further information and sources.

### **3 The Project**

The project idea of the Federation of Children's and Youth Municipal Councils was based on the observation that some Hungarian municipalities have difficulties to involve young people in certain discussions. The project was designed to help the communities to build their capacities for youth dialogue and to initiate and establish measures to involve the youth in policy-making and decisions which directly affect them. In doing so, it was intended to link the dialogue with the principles of youth work. For the organisation, this meant that the dialogue had to be conducted in a bottom-up and nonhierarchical way.

The project was active and present in five municipalities of the two regions. The organisation did not have the competence to establish such a dialogue on its own but could only support the municipalities in building the capacities for a structured dialogue with the youth, hence being dependent on their motivation and drive. Thus, creating a partnership with a local government was an essential precondition for reaching the project aims. The organisation asked a local government for a local partner, and the cooperation was fixed in a written agreement between the organisation and the municipality. According to the NGO, this official agreement turned out to be vital for the organisation.

Almost the whole yearly budget of the organisation comes from the EU, since there is overall very little money for youth dialogue or youth work in Hungary. According to the organisation, budgets for such projects have been strongly underfunded especially since the late 2000s, and the few funds that would have been available were not very attractive to it. Therefore, it seemed natural to approach the EU again. However, the project was not designed to promote the EU in the way of advertising but rather to teach about the European context. Upon the proposal, the project was funded with 19,714 Euros which covered all the needed staff, the office, materials, expert fees, activity costs and other expenditures.

Since the project was in its second cycle, organising it was not a completely new experience. Besides, the organisation could build on its long-term experience with youth projects on topics like citizenship, communities and dialogues which were always placed in the context of the EU. The plan of the project was very loosely scheduled as the preconditions vary a lot between the municipalities. In the whole project, the local contact persons in the cooperating municipalities had a very important role for planning the events and contacting the local youth. The project managing organisation provided help on how to reach out to young people. According to its approach towards informal learning, they simply started to build contacts with local youth, without any precondition or specific goal to reach. They just invited young people paying attention to the local circumstances like the time slots of sports school and the possibilities of using the public transportation. They had local meetings with the youth and had discussions with them.

In contrast to the first cycle of the project, the second one was marked by the SARS-Covid pandemic, and, therefore, there were fewer meetings with officials than in the first cycle. The project became in these terms a much more rudimentary youth work programme. The organisation concentrated on offering young people spaces,

social activities and discussions on EU topics, but there was little interaction with politicians and less possibilities of exchange with young people from different regions.

The organisation felt that the project's most important aspect was to give a voice to young people. Therefore, it kept formalities as little as possible, avoided a paternalistic agenda setting from above and tried to establish an atmosphere of trust and appreciation first. In effect, there were no predefined programme points or topics which had to be handled. Instead, the young participants could set the agenda of talks and chose people they wanted to talk to. For the youth in the region where the project took place, higher level politicians were far away from their reality. Therefore, they did not invite EU actors, although the EU was always a topic in the project. Instead, the project involved decision-makers at the local level.

While almost one third of the organisation's projects are international and therefore held in English, the *(un)Attractive? II* project was carried out in Hungarian. The fact that foreign language education in rural areas is not very advanced was a factor for the choice of the project's makeup and also one of the reasons for not inviting people from Brussels (along with the feeling that EU politicians are far away from their lives).

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## 4 Outcomes

The organisation regards the inclusion and commitment of young people as the main achievements of the project. Students in five municipalities were heard and empowered to become active. Due to its participative character, the young people involved learned to express their ideas and interests. Besides this, the project strengthened awareness of the EU as well as knowledge about it. Local youth conferences as well as two simulation practices were held. Thus, the aim of the project to build and foster cooperation among decision-makers and young people was reached. These measures can serve as good practice models.

For the organisation, this is particularly important in the Hungarian environment where young people are not well addressed and involved at school and in politics. For that reason, it received positive feedback from participants for their approach. However, there was no structured evaluation system applied by the organisation. The long-term effects of the project are difficult to measure. On the one hand, this is due to its short duration and the structure of the project. On the other hand, a systematic evaluation of the effects of certain measures or aspects would need more experts and more funding.

Even after the project ended, the organisation kept in touch with the municipalities where the project was carried out. It therefore knows that out of the five municipalities, only one was continuing to maintain the project measures. This is why it feels that the programme needs to be continued in a comparable way to help communities to strengthen their youth work in the long run.

## 5 Success Factors

For the organisation, the success factors include experienced personnel, support by the EU in terms of funding, a local basis in terms of contacts, the invitation of decision-makers and the project format and the inclusion of youth dialogue in a regular EU organisation.

The long-time experience of the organisation helped them in applying for funding. In their understanding, applying for EU funds is rather easy, as there are extensive written instructions on how to do it. With the updated Erasmus+ accreditation process, it has become even easier to apply for funds. Previously, single-project applications had taken up quite some time and made planning more uncertain. Generally, the organisation was pleased with the funding schemes and found the application process easy and transparent. Thus, they see themselves as more experienced as they have been involved in funding processes over a long time.

The organisation was also very satisfied with the terms of the funding. They had enough flexibility in using the money. In their experience, the conditions improved over the years in that beneficiaries are freer to decide on what to spend their money. The organisation feels very happy with the new feedback process. They suggested that future funding budgets should be adapted for inflation to avoid becoming increasingly tight over the years.

The organisation also considers that the local basis of projects is also as a success factor. Because the organisation lacked local knowledge, its contact persons in the cooperating municipalities were very important. They had and held contact with the young people in the area and thus functioned as door openers for the organisation. Furthermore, the organisation argues that if a project is tied to a person and not to a municipality or office, the chances of involving motivated local partners are much higher. Ideally, the local contact person is already a youth worker and has established contact with the young people in the community. The local contact person/youth worker can also be the key for the sustainability of a project. The other way around, the organisation experienced that if that person leaves or has no interest in continuing, the programme often ends.

According to the organisation, another success factor is inviting local decision-makers instead of ones on a EU level. Unlike EU officials or politicians, local decision-makers are more a part of the reality of the young participants. In particular, the involvement of key EU actors would tend to create a hierarchy, where the voice of the youth would stand back in relation to it. In the view of the organisation, involving EU actors would be a next step further down the road which would need more information and preparedness. Moreover, this would require a better command of English than the people in the peripheral rural areas of Hungary often have. At this moment, EU institutions and actors are too far away from the regions, and, therefore, inviting them would not be desirable for projects like the one described here. The organisation also finds that it is not so much about teaching the organisational structures or main benefits of the European Union, even though they are important. Instead, projects must be more about the young people themselves and their needs and aspirations. In the experience of the organisation, the involvement of local

decision-makers is a more successful approach in that sense and can lead to more practical results.

The need for local embeddedness also refers to the overall makeup of youth projects. While the organisation mentions that, theoretically, there would be a demand for cross-border projects, such projects would need much more information, language skills, preparation and commitments from the participants. In this case, any sort of expansion to an international level might complicate projects for the particular target group of young people in the Hungarian rural areas. Although the organisation does some international cooperation with project partners, travelling out of Hungary is perceived as being very far away from the reality of the people they work with and therefore almost impossible.

Last but not least, the organisation regards the very existence of the framework of the EU youth dialogues as another success factor. It appreciates it as being much in line with its philosophy of making young voices heard. Without the programme, it would be much more difficult to carry out any similar activities in Hungary where the preconditions for youth engagement are not the best. In such an environment, empowerment needs support from outside the country and constant activities. Therefore, the permanent character of the youth dialogues as envisaged by the EU framework and their embeddedness in overall EU policy-making are regarded as essential, even if the impact of it is not always measurable. It creates a climate where the whole topic of youth involvement is valued.

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## 6 Problems and Wishes

The organisation mentioned that compared to its project experience in the districts around Budapest in the first cycle, it faced completely different challenges in the second one conducted in the southern great plains of Békés county. The problems included a more hesitant approach of local officials and partners towards social projects in general and scepticism regarding EU funding of such projects in particular, as well as a worse infrastructural situation in rural areas and a de facto uneven access to the EU and other funding opportunities.

The hesitation of the regional partners towards social projects was different from the Budapest region. The difference became noticeable in how the people were ready to talk about youth work, community building, structured dialogue and community involvement. Therefore, according to the project organisers, youth projects in the south are faced with much more scepticism. In addition, even though the EU is known in these regions, it is mostly connected with financial support for the large-scale public infrastructural projects of the state. EU-related and EU-funded youth work as offered by the *(un)Attractive? II* project was a novelty for many of them. Especially in southern rural areas the EU, co-financing of other than infrastructural projects is often met with suspicion. However, the organisation had the experience that scepticism towards EU-related funds, which are not infrastructural, varied strongly across and even within the municipalities.

Additionally, the project had to adapt to the infrastructural shortcomings of certain municipalities. In the southern district, poor public transportation made it hard to find time slots for activities people could attend. In this regard, the organisation had much more work to ensure access to the people. Because of this and the problems associated with the coronavirus, the project became much more a basic youth/social work programme with less opportunities for EU involvement.

While funding opportunities are theoretically available to a wider public, there are *de facto* differences. Regarding the domestic funding schemes, the organisation feels that applying organisations are treated differently depending on their topics and their political views. The organisation was not very successful with its proposals in the first years and over the last years and explicitly tried to avoid applying for national funding due to a strong disagreement with national politics.

The access to EU funding programmes is biased in another way. According to the organisation, the overall information and representation of the EU is very focused on Budapest. For organisations in the rural areas, getting in touch with EU administration and people, who give inspiration and practical support, seems to be more complicated, especially for individuals who are usually not experienced in funding processes. Therefore, the project organisation suggests to employ more mobile EU representatives to inform more people about the funding possibilities offered by the EU. They argue that direct contact with the people is needed. The EU should therefore have more Erasmus offices than just the one in Budapest. The several existing offices from Europe Direct in Hungary are not working well in the eyes of the organisation. To invest the money they receive from the EU more wisely, they should reach out to the people showing them their possibilities rather than waiting for the people to approach the EU. As they already have money for their programmes, they also need to make it available to the people.

The organisation mentioned additional obstacles for a lot of people from remote rural areas in Hungary. Since foreign language education is poor, a student exchange with other European countries is almost impossible, for example. Furthermore, if there is no information about the EU available in the region or if the economic realities are harsh, then some EU programmes are exclusive, i.e. *de facto* not accessible to the inhabitants irrespectively of the formal right to participate. Programmes like the 'DiscoverEU', theoretically open for anyone from any region of Europe, need more support from the EU. Otherwise, they only reach those who are already privileged in other terms. For metropolitan western youth, the EU is open anyways, the organisation says. In its view, the rural youth from the east however needs more support than the programme offers. While reaching out to the people is maybe more the duty of the member states, the organisation sees the EU as responsible for covering such tasks if neglected by its member states.

At the same time, those who are better informed about the EU funding options so far often find them easily accessible. In this way, according to the project organisation, a lot of NGOs are specialised in applying for money without paying close attention to the contents of the projects and creating a real impact with them.



## 7 Conclusion

Overall, the organisation is very satisfied with the EU youth dialogues and funding conditions. It will continue their projects in the future and plans on taking part in larger EU programmes. Furthermore, the project organisers feel that their work in Hungary is still very important. Especially the imbalance between the rural areas in the south and around Budapest shows the need for such projects. They strongly identify with Europe and stress that there is much more need for projects involving young people in the European peripheries. While they have some concerns towards the political climate in Hungary, they do not feel that it would hinder them continuing their work. Their goal is to be able to have the organisation a bit more structured in the future.

In conclusion, the organisation gives the advice to listen more to young people. They suggest that the focus should not be so much about involving important actors or teaching the organisational structures and main benefits of the Union but much more about conveying the values of the EU and giving people a voice, especially those ones in remote rural areas. Involving the young people and not deciding above their heads, taking a less paternalistic view on youth work and empowering the youth mean also to be receptive to the de facto uneven access to existing EU programmes. They feel that, ideally, the involvement of young people could take place at an even earlier age than with young adults. In their view, this supports European citizenship and the whole idea of the European Union in the long term.

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# Even Successful Projects Must End? Lessons Learned from the Project *The Best Is Yet to Come*

Henriette Bockelmann and Svenja Samstag

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## 1 Introduction

The international project *The best is yet to come. Youth create tomorrow's rural reality from a village to a wider Europe* was carried out in 2019 by the Latvian Lauku Forum in response to depopulation in many rural areas in Europe, which diminishes the potential of these areas (European Commission 2022). Its main objective was to engage and empower rural youth; to connect them with local-, national- and European-level decision-makers; and also to raise the awareness of stakeholders concerning the importance of youth involvement in rural development processes. The organisers became motivated to develop and to seek participants for this particular project when the European Commission advertised the European Rural Youth Parliament (ERYP), a Pan-European event for discussions about rural development.<sup>1</sup> As the forum is generally working on projects aiming at rural areas, its members knew about the necessity for reaching out to young people and getting them involved into development questions and capacity building.

The Lauku Forum is a national network based in Riga, the capital of Latvia. The forum is an umbrella organisation leading and coordinating 35 local action groups, as well as 50 associated members working to engage people into rural development projects, which strengthen city associations and enhance the practice of EU citizenship. The aim is to make rural areas more attractive and liveable. While young people had not been a prior target group of the forum so far, its structure allowed the forum to reach especially young people in more rural and remote areas of the country.

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<sup>1</sup>The report is based primarily on an interview with Katrīna Idū who was intensively involved in the project.

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The goals of the Lauku Forum are closely connected to the second pillar of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which is to support rural areas in economic, environmental and societal issues by funding national and local projects to improve the status quo. While the activities in the project were mainly concentrated on Latvia, cooperation with organisations in other European countries and at the EU level underlined a strong European approach.

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## 2 The General Local and Regional Environment in Latvia

Although situated in the Baltic region, the context conditions of the project in Latvia were quite similar to those in East Central European countries. The foreign project partners came from rural areas in eight countries, among them two East Central European countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia), four Balkan states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Kosovo) and two older EU member states (Belgium, Spain). From the very beginning the project organisers stressed the similarity of the challenges rural areas across Europe have to face, especially depopulation. Young people often do not believe that their civic activities can influence rural development and that their voice counts at the European, national and even at the local level.

According to the project organisers, young people also in Latvia hardly engage in politics because they expect that they cannot make a difference for European, national or local politics. Jonāne et al. report that “Only one-fourth of youth participate actively in diverse social activities, for example, in sports and volunteer work” (see p. 157 in Jonāne et al. 2022 and Graudiņa 2022). Especially young and highly educated people do not see chances in rural areas and therefore move to larger cities or abroad to study or due to other reasons. Many young people never come back, and, as a result, there is a substantial brain drain.<sup>2</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic might have brought some change to this. The option to work remotely made many people come back to Latvia, which is generally a “quiet, nice place to spend a life”, as Katrīna Idū from the project team put it. The economic situation is probably worse than elsewhere in Europe, but due to the lack of young people, companies and businesses are not that hierarchic and career options are better.

Most young people in Latvia—similar to the society and most political parties—have sympathy for the EU (Auers 2020). They are more in favour of the EU than older people and happy to be a part of it, which might be due to exchange programs and the possibility to travel throughout Europe. While, on average, the Russian war against Ukraine enhanced this positive stance towards Europe, there are regional differences. In the territory close to the Russian border, many inhabitants are ethnic

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<sup>2</sup>See on this topic Hazans 2019, Sander 2018, Pužulis and Kūle 2016.

Russians<sup>3</sup> who do not feel attached to the EU.<sup>4</sup> This fact goes hand in hand with the way people are consuming information.

Information regarding the EU and EU-related projects is provided by a national agency in Riga, coordinating Erasmus+ work. Due to this direct linkage to the European level, applying for European fundings is easy for actors in Riga and nearby. However, in rural areas, especially those close to Russia, such facilities are missing. According to Katrīna Idū, the organisations in these regions are not able to acquire an equal share of EU project funding. Especially in remote rural areas, it is more complicated to get information or access to EU-related projects. Some NGOs are working at a local level but without EU funding. In sum, the regional actors often lack the capacity to speak for themselves on EU issues.

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### **3 The Project: Strengthening the Pan-European Network and National Activities**

The project *The best is yet to come* was the second of its kind organised by the Latvian Lauku Forum. It was initiated prior to the European Rural Youth Parliament (ERYP), which took place in November 2019 in Spain. The main goal of the project was to strengthen the Lauku Forum's youth activities and to support the partner organisations which are part of the national network the forum is coordinating. Furthermore, it planned to create a network that would enable young people to get involved in the rural development of Europe and make their voices, standpoints and ideas heard at the European level. For that end, the project aimed at initiating events and capacity building processes for young people, giving them the opportunities to engage with each other and to deepen their knowledge about rural development and to develop ideas that were then disseminated to the European level.

The forum used its existing contacts with partners and organisations all over Europe, including the Balkan countries, and also sought to expand them. The organisations involved are mainly engaged within and also funded by the EU development approach LEADER.

When developing the project, members of the Lauku Forum directly applied for Erasmus+ funding as they already knew about this funding possibility. As they report, the website of the Agency for International Programs for Youth in Latvia provided helpful information about the timing and details of the application process. The project proposal was written and elaborated by a youth representative at the forum with some support by the national agency. The funding was mainly used to cover mobility costs, including costs to travel to Spain where the ERYP took place,

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<sup>3</sup>Most ethnic Russians live in the cities, but their share of the local population is lower in these cities than near the Russian border.

<sup>4</sup>According to Eihmanis (2019: 8), “accession to the EU was supported by 57% of Latvian speakers and only 20% of Russian speakers”. Still today, “The opinions of Latvia’s sizeable Russian-speaking population might partially explain why overall trust in the EU in Latvia is lower than in Estonia and Lithuania (49%, 53%, and 65%, respectively; Eurobarometer, 2018)” (ibid.: 5).

as well as management fees resulting from the strategic partnership character of the project.

One of the first and most important steps of the project was to reach out to young people. All the partner organisations contacted the young people in their respective countries. The Lauku Forum chose to prepare a call for participants and disseminate it throughout Latvia via its other partner organisations. The call invited all young people irrespective of their prior contacts with one of the organisations, and it did not require experience in a specific field but just a general interest in the field of rural development. Nevertheless, most participants came from the partner organisations.

An indirect, but substantial, requirement, however, was to be able to communicate in English because—due to the transnational character of the ERYP—parts of the project needed to be conducted in English. The participating young people had to be able to present themselves in English and to sufficiently understand the discussions. In practice, this turned out to be an obstacle to attracting participants, especially in the Balkan countries.

In preparing the European Rural Youth Parliament, the organisers intended to transfer the ideas of the project participants to a European level, and they also invited European decision-makers. The young people first discussed issues of rural development with each other, and in the next step representatives of the European Rural Youth Parliament went to Brussels to exchange with the decision-makers the results of their work. They met members of the European Parliament from Italy, Latvia and Germany, for example. Another connection to the European level was the European National Rural Development Network, which works for the European Commission as a networking organisation. The project team presented the results and the final declaration there. In sum, the connection with the EU-level actors and EU decision-makers was perceived as very good.

In the implementation phase, the project was substantially in line with what the organisers had promised and expected in the original plan. However, there were minor deviations concerning the timing. For example, some preparatory activities took longer than planned, and meeting the people at the EU level that the participants wanted to see required some flexibility in scheduling.

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#### **4 Outcomes: A European Rural Youth Declaration and the Dissemination of Ideas**

The short-term achievements of the projects were manifold. As planned, many partners participated in networking, and young people were reached and involved in discussions about policy. Especially, the preparation of the Youth Opinion on rural development at the European Rural Parliament was an achievement. Also, the European Youth Declaration that the participants fixed<sup>5</sup> was essential to keep this

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<sup>5</sup>European Rural Youth Declaration. 6 November 2019. <https://europeanruralparliament.com/index.php/eryp-declaration/category/72-2019> (Accessed 13 October 2022).

position and to present it at further occasions. At the final session, when the young people presented the declaration, they surprised the audience with their elaborated ideas, which was seen as a big success. The transfer to the European level succeeded in that the project team met with decision-makers, and the results and the final declaration of the Conference were presented to the European National Rural Development Network. The young people could express their views about rural development and necessary changes vocally and on a prominent stage.

Another more indirect outcome was that the participants brought their experiences from the discussions in Spain and Brussels back to their own country. This might help to spread ideas, arguments and insights for rural development and possibly also to change minds regarding rural and European issues.

According to the organisation, the long-term effects are also promising. After the termination of the project, many participants started asking for the new activities of the youth network. The lasting strength of the network also became apparent when the ELARD organisation published a new call for projects. Many people from the original project *The best is yet to come* were also involved in the following one and the activities related to the European Rural Youth Parliament. Moreover, the dissemination of the ideas of the young people had a lasting effect. Even after the project, the team was still invited to events to present their network. This contributed to keeping the network of young people active for quite a long time and even for the preparation of the next project proposal. The young people were very enthusiastic about everything that happened, so they were also willing to volunteer for the next planned project and to keep in contact. The proposal for the next project, however, was not approved.

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## 5 What Made the Project Successful

According to the project organisers, it was not just one particular component that made the project a success but a combination of different factors.

In the case of the European Rural Youth Parliament, the ERP had already been a well-functioning issue. They added a focus on young people to create the new project *The best is yet to come*. For the Latvian part, it was also very important that the Erasmus+ programme, which provided financial support, matched the ideas of the people involved. For the funding application and project implementation, being part of an already existing network inside Latvia and also beyond the borders was beneficial, as was a good connection to the EU decision-makers that were invited.

Another success factor was the commitment of young interested people. The project had to attract their interest and involve them. As usual, the expectations varied. For some young people, the main incentive was the opportunity to meet people of the same age and to build friendships. For others, the opportunity of traveling throughout Europe, and perhaps even leaving the own country for the first time in their life, was very important. Through organised field trips, they learned more about new and innovative approaches to local development in other countries.

These were welcome experiences that they brought back to their home countries and towns to share, to learn from and to improve their own development strategies. For those young people already engaged in EU issues, projects like the one described are a chance to present themselves, to show their own ideas and capacities and to connect with people with expert knowledge. They are more interested in speaking to members of the European Parliament or to young people in other countries who are involved in European-level work to learn about their strategies and achievements.

The project organisers found it important to build a connection to the “real world”. According to them, young people feel more inspired to engage in EU-focused projects if they are involved not only in the implementation but also in the planning and other stages of such projects. In this way, young people are given a feeling of responsibility and ownership. Help from more experienced people is necessary but more in the sense of guidance that supports the ideas and thoughts of the young people by offering and giving them advice if needed. For people more interested in talking to EU decision-makers, the ability to express their own thoughts and ideas in another language than their mother tongue is important. Such language skills are less relevant when connecting with other young people horizontally or in planning the project.

The organisers also mentioned that the makeup of a project depends on a project’s aim. *The best is yet to come* wanted to disseminate the important topics and issues of rural development in certain areas to a wider audience in different institutions and to create a flowing exchange “from a village to a wider Europe”. Thus, it was all about connecting the local level with the national and also the European level. The organisers also underlined the value of this multi-level exchange, arguing that the actors themselves know best about the development issues in the areas they are living in. When addressing the problems and solutions of rural areas, just considering a European perspective would fail to induce the necessary changes. Complementing the vertical flow of knowledge, the organisers also stressed the value of the horizontal projects. These cross-border interactions have helped to get a better understanding of different cultures, different viewpoints and different approaches and strategies in dealing with similar issues and challenges.

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## 6 Problems and Wishes

Based on their project experience, the forum identified some sensitive issues and problems for European youth work, including the peculiarities of the target group and financing.

A point that needs to be taken into account is the specifics of the target group. Working with young people, for example, implies practical difficulties to ensure that they buy tickets and really appear at the events. Although they want to be involved in the overall project, sometimes they are more interested in appealing aspects like traveling rather than in participating in the preparation process and discussions. Besides, interest in the topic, the personal environment or the resources in terms of



time can change abruptly during the project. Nevertheless, the organisers stressed that young people want to be taken seriously and to be addressed on an equal footing and that this should be considered when managing such a project. They also mentioned that more time in terms of motivation, information and communication is needed than in working with adults. They advise to stand back and to observe how the young people are doing things and to provide help or motivation if necessary. In case of unexpected setbacks or failure, it would be important to be there for them and to try to understand them. The goal would be the creation of a kind of community feeling, where everybody knows they are supported when encountering difficulties.

According to the project organisers, another more serious problem is funding. In general, they would like to see more sustainable and comprehensive ways to support youth engagement across Europe at a regional and local level. Such funding would help to provide people information and explain EU structures and policies. With more reliable and continuous funding, there would be networking activities, online and on the ground, participation at different events and further opportunities to develop and spread ideas with many young people as part of the network. To date, most EU funding is project-based, and according to the forum, the limits of this approach in terms of sustainability are obvious. Many organisations want to work continuously, but they never know if their projects will be approved again or not. Experienced staff members are leaving for more secure jobs. Especially for supporting the establishment and ongoing work of Pan-European networks, the EU should offer capacities for long-term projects. As the organisers have underlined, this does not necessarily mean that this needs a lot of money, but long-term support to give the feeling that they are there for them even without having to communicate a lot.

Moreover, the project organisers criticise that EU funding is less flexible than other funding options and that sometimes adhering to established schemes and routines is given more weight than the results. Organisers feel obliged to fulfil certain requirements, even though they know it will not produce the desired results. However, there are also the possibilities of consulting EU actors or agencies on how to meet the formal requirements. Finally, the organisers suggest that there should be an option to link two or more projects together to ensure a more useful mixture of measures.

Last but not least, the organisers underline that it would be a potential problem to ignore the local level of EU citizenship. Activities in the regions would be necessary; otherwise, the EU would be limited in “a kind of superficial transnational cloud”. According to the forum, the crucial point lies in an adequate connection between all the local activities and the process of coordinating them at the EU level. The process of bringing the EU closer to people and asking them to express their ideas should have a high priority and is missing at the present stage. Initiatives to bridge the European and the regional level should not remain an empty slogan or be conducted by taking large surveys but be realised in a direct dialogue with the people on the ground. If the EU really has an interest in strengthening the local level and young people, this should be supported and continuously financed, the organisation argues.

## 7 Conclusion and Outlook

In summary, *The best is yet to come* illustrates both the chances and the obstacles of projects with young people in the context of EU citizenship. Due to the pan-European project structure and the connection to the European level, the project enabled direct exchange with EU decision-makers. In addition, it provided the infrastructure to prepare a written European Rural Youth Declaration, which turned out to be a suitable basis for presenting concerns regarding the development issues in rural areas. Nevertheless, the project met several obstacles, including administrative challenges during the funding process or in ensuring constant motivation among young people. The main lesson learned from the project is that—due to different reasons—young people in rural areas are generally interested in getting involved in EU-related topics and to practice their own EU citizenship within such a framework. This general interest, however, needs to be promoted through attractive, encouraging and sustainable projects. According to the organisers, it is primarily up to the EU to provide financial and organisational resources to ensure the sustainability of such activities.

While *The best is yet to come* can be considered a successful model, the Lauku Forum will probably not continue to carry out projects like this during the next 10 years. The European Rural Youth Parliament, mainly developed in the course of two projects (one of them described here), was no longer organised by the forum after two rounds. Instead, the European Leader Association for Rural Development took over the lead. This mirrors the evolution of this cooperation format from a format coordinated by the Latvian level to one coordinated at the European level. The Lauku Forum will continue to work on different rural development questions, but it is presently concentrating on bigger research projects at the European level and on its local work in Latvia.

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# A School Workshop Format for 13–15-Year-Old Pupils: *Experiencing and Understanding Europe*

Bérénice Jolly and Jakub Fikejzl

## 1 Introduction

The project *Experiencing and Understanding Europe* started in 2019 and conducted interactive European workshops as well as project days at schools. The project aimed at making Europe tangible for young people by providing knowledge and opportunities for participation. This was intended to promote a democratic culture and commitment to Europe and thus reduce resentments and prejudices on this subject. Part of the project was dedicated to the training of young teamers who then developed the project in terms of methods and content and carried out the events (European Commission 2022).

The project was organised by Die Villa, a youth and cultural centre in Leipzig. This city of 600,000 inhabitants is located in Eastern Germany, a region that shares many context characteristics with its neighbour regions in East Central Europe. The Villa carries out projects in the areas of youth, culture and social affairs. It reaches out to different audiences, including youth or older people, providing an open space for discussion and activities. The centre is also involved in international youth work, conducting workshops on EU issues and political education as well as promoting the European idea (European Union 2022). The project *Solidarity connects Europe*, for example, gives pupils the opportunity to take part in an exchange program (KulturGut Linda 2022). For young people of rural areas, this is a chance to discover other European countries. Within the Villa, the *Junior Europe Team* organises workshops, project days and seminars, both on-site and in the rural areas of the federal state of Saxony which are close to Poland and the Czech

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Republic.<sup>1</sup> The Junior Europe Team is composed of volunteers who receive a small compensation for their work.

Around 50 people, including many volunteers, work for the Villa, which is organised as a non-profit limited liability company and mostly funded by public money in diverse forms. Social workers are often paid by the Youth Welfare Office, and some people's positions are funded by donations. Some programs are funded by the federal state of Saxony (more specifically, the "Landesdirektion") as well as the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs. The funding scheme changes every year depending on the amount of public funding. The EU team consists of six people, some of them paid by the German Youth Welfare Office ("Jugendamt"), some by the Erasmus+ program and others by the IJAB, a networking organisation of international youth work in Germany.

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## 2 The General Local and Regional Environment

According to the people who organised the project, young people in East German Saxony, especially in the rural areas, often don't get in touch with politics and EU politics in particular. Hence, they do not have the space to discuss these political issues. For young people in this region, the European Union does not seem to play a big role in their lives and they often lack interest and knowledge on that subject. The people organising the project report that there are many preconceived ideas about the EU, as well as stereotypes and clichés. A common perception of young people, for example, is that the German administration is more powerful than EU institutions in the field of politics. The European Union is seen as something distant that lacks actual impact.

In Saxony, access to EU-related projects is much easier in bigger cities like Leipzig or Dresden than in rural areas. The city of Leipzig, for example, is committed to the idea of the EU and has several organisations linked to the EU, regularly organising EU-related events. In Leipzig, there is a European House ("Europahaus"), directly funded by EU institutions with the mission to promote the EU to a broader public, while the Villa focuses on young people. The Villa often collaborates with the European House by connecting schools to the Villa, so that the Villa can organise workshops with pupils there. The Villa also maintains a partnership with Europe Direct in Dresden and close ties with the Young European Federalists (YEF), a youth organisation. Moreover, there are several other organisations which host European volunteers, for example, as the European Solidarity Corps. Overall, these various connections show that the bigger cities of Saxony have a dense network of organisations working together on EU topics.

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<sup>1</sup>The present information rests mainly on an interview carried out on 3 June 2022 with Philipp Niese, project coordinator of the EU team, and Jessica Reinsch, working on the project "Solidarity connects Europe" in the Department for International Youth Work.

### 3 The Project

With its project *Experiencing and Understanding Europe*, the Villa intended to build trust in EU institutions and to show young people how the EU is connected to their everyday lives. The project organisers went to schools to introduce young people to the European Union and to overcome prevailing clichés. Through discussions happening in German, young people were intended to get a more concrete idea of Europe and of the importance of EU institutions, as well as becoming an active part of society. By discussing EU-related topics, young people got the opportunity to critically engage in a dialogue and to confront new ideas, developing their constructive criticism, openness and mutual respect.

Inclusive access to knowledge was an important feature of the project and the organisation paid particular attention to reaching a broader public. It organised workshops, not only at high schools (gymnasiums), but also at schools for pupils with disabilities. Besides that, it planned to organise a substantial number of workshops in rural regions, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most workshops took place in Leipzig and Dresden.

Originally started in 2007, the project was temporarily paused and restarted in 2017 with a new junior team. In 2019, it received its first funding from the European Union. This was possible due to a network of people working on EU issues and providing good preconditions for organising the workshops. As mentioned, the Leipzig European House is the main partner of *the Villa*. Both partners share rooms, knowledge and moderator training. The Young European Federalists also organise events with the Villa and often moderate workshops. The city of Leipzig and the state of Saxony organise regular events such as Europe-related project days every year, where the EU team of the Villa participates by conducting workshops. These existing collaborations provided a good basis for the project. There was sufficient expertise and experience in writing funding proposals. The funding covered some part of the wages and organisational costs for the workshops. Travelling and transport costs were not covered.

The project was organised by the Junior Europe Team. The 18–26-year-old people moderating the workshops had different backgrounds. Their practical tasks involved the organisation of two or three interactive workshops per month and project days at schools, with a certain percentage taking place in schools located in rural areas. Other tasks were to reach a certain number of participants and to ensure inclusivity, for example, with regard to gender. Another task was to organise round table discussions with politicians during project days at schools.

The young teamers also conducted the workshops. They already had relevant knowledge on the EU, e.g. because they studied political science or European studies, and they attended a training session that prepared them for the job in terms of methodology and content. The aim was to communicate knowledge and provide opportunities for participation in a way that is appropriate for young people. Activities were intended to show the pupils that aspects of their lives are associated with the European Union (e.g. through the regulations on light bulbs). The young

teamers used practical examples and interactive methods, so that Europe became tangible for young people.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, it was difficult to realise the intended working program. Schools were closed and events with a larger number of participants became impossible. Under these circumstances, many workshops could not be realised, and the project, originally planned for 1 year, had to be extended. The funding was reduced and so were the working hours of the members. During the lockdown, workshops took place online, but only private schools had the technical equipment to attend. This created inequalities in access to knowledge between schools and pupils from different backgrounds, challenging inclusivity as an important aspect of the project. The project in its original form could only start again properly after the end of lockdowns in Germany.

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## 4 Outcomes

According to the organisers, the project achievements could already be seen during the workshops. At the beginning, the students had no idea about the topic and were shy to participate in the discussions. In the end, they became more engaged and eager to discuss the topics. Most of them understood their connection to the EU and the daily effects, such as roaming fees and travelling, which are popular topics for young people. The evaluation by the students at the end of the workshop revealed that they felt different about the topic after discussing it. They reported to have learned something and that they liked the activity. They also wished for more workshops like the ones provided by the Villa.

The project organisers are convinced that the participants' awareness of the importance of EU institutions has grown throughout the workshops. This could encourage pupils to participate in the life of the European Union as active citizens. Besides that, they were informed about exchange possibilities such as the European Solidarity Corps that do not require participants to be part of a study program. This program enables people to go abroad for free and be paid for it. While such short-term effects of knowledge transfer are easy to detect, the organisers find it is hard to measure the long-term impact of their project.

Other important signs of success were the growing number of schools asking to be part of the project, as well as the partnerships that were built between schools and the project. The project organisers also considered the long-term engagement of workshop facilitators in the project as a success.

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## 5 Success Factors

For the projects of the Villa to be successful, some factors seem to matter. These include involving young people, tailoring workshops to different target groups and choosing the right workshop duration.

The project organisers believe that involving students from a young age is a strong factor for preparing them for active participation in EU's civic life. If the interests of young people are to be addressed properly and if one wants to give them ownership for the preparation of the projects, it definitely makes sense for them to involve themselves early in the project preparation phase. Thanks to this, they will learn more about their possibilities to actively take part in society and in their environment. Usually the project described above involves young people aged between 13 and 18 years old. The organisation's experience shows that some young people at this age already have much stress at school or at home. To still involve them in the process of project planning, it is important to present the possible aims, contents and measures very openly but also not too much in detail because to not overwhelm them with too many opportunities. Usually, it takes a couple of months until they realise that they have the power to make such decisions in the Villa's projects.

Since EU projects aiming at the promotion of active EU citizenship can either be focused on local or regional topics or on the major issues and narratives of the EU, the project organisers have stressed the importance of adapting the workshops to a target audience. Given that 13-year-old teenagers might find it difficult to discuss major subjects around EU politics, such as geopolitical and economic challenges, it is better to deal with issues that have direct relevance for them. That is why the organisers developed a game with a bag containing items for everyday use linked to the EU. It allows them to replace the abstract role and system of the EU with concrete ideas that are relevant for younger citizens. Besides that, it enables everyone to take part in discussions about the EU, independent of one's background. By choosing easy, practical and interesting topics for young people, they stir the interest of pupils that might have never thought about the fact that they are affected by EU institutions and civic life. Such topics are, for example, roaming fees or the possibility to go to work or study abroad.

According to the project organisers, for older students from 18–20 years old, both national and local projects and cross-border projects could have a strong impact on the engagement of young people in EU-related matters. These people do already have more experience and are used to travelling to many different countries. They do not remember the times when there existed borders, border controls and visas, and cannot imagine it to be different. The organisation finds EU cross-border project programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps very beneficial. For the younger people aged 13–15, it is important to inform them early on about the exchange programs offered by the EU, so that they know their options if they want to go abroad later.

Another success factor is to provide an optimal duration for the workshops. They need to be adapted to an audience and at the same time allow for constructive and interesting discussions with pupils so that they will want to participate again. The organisation offers 90-min workshops for younger pupils. This time frame determines the possibilities. A discussion with a politician, for example, would need at least 60 min, which can be long for pupils. Therefore, discussions with



politicians were not used for the short school workshops but were included in workshops on particular EU project days.

While the main language of the workshops described here was German, the organisation also offers international projects. Based on these experiences, it is important for the success of projects to check the language requirements when planning the format of a new project. In the organisation of youth exchanges, there is a fear that English can be an obstacle for the participants. In practice, people can communicate using dictionary apps or translation websites on their phones. Despite these technologies, they sometimes realise during their exchange trips how important it is to have a practical knowledge of English and come to the conclusion that they should have invested more time in learning the language.

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## 6 Problems and Wishes

When implementing the project, the organisers faced some difficulties. These problems include some practical problems, but the bigger concern of the project organisation is its long-term funding and the overall strategy of the EU towards youth dialogue projects.

Regarding practical problems, the organisers have mentioned the difficulties in reaching schools, because of their lack of interest or difficulties in including the workshops in their school program. Moreover, young people tend to distrust politicians, because they have a feeling that they are not really listening to them. In feedback sessions to the various workshops, the young people reported that they had questions, but the politicians did not really respond to them. Therefore, the Villa does not find it very useful for EU-related workshops to invite politicians. Another challenge was the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown. Similar circumstances could be tackled with a better access of all schools to a digital infrastructure.

Funding seems to raise questions the Villa, however, this did not affect the project implementation, which went on without many complications. When planning the *Experiencing and Understanding Europe* project and other EU projects, the Villa reported to have a high level of autonomy and flexibility, and both Erasmus+ and the German national agency of administration were very supportive. When implementing the project, there was the requirement to provide documents and reports, but in the end the EU and the national agency of administration were again perceived as quite flexible and helpful.

The concerns about funding refer to the fact that it would be easier for the organisation to have long and stable connections with the funders, which would assure stable financing and security. This could be achieved with stable and long-term funding for the project itself but also for staff salaries to guarantee that their work is secure. Currently, the organisation depends on the regular approval of funding from EU institutions to enable the implementation of the projects. Each time, this requires administrative documents and funding applications, implying important resources. The organisers of the Villa need to take the time to do the administrative work on a regular basis, which could be used for project work instead.

Moreover, the European Union funded only the project itself, not the entire organisation surrounding it, such as wages or the infrastructure. To be able to build and to conduct the project, it was therefore necessary to combine different funding and support. This was made possible, because other actors contribute to securing the financial basis of the organisation. Thanks to public funding of the Villa's employees by the state of Saxony, the Villa could use the entire EU funding for the project. The organisation argues that in other countries, such as Spain, the funding situation is different. There, comparable organisations have to use part of the EU project funding to pay their employees and thus end up with less money for the project. This causes an unequal access of young people to EU-related information. Unlike in poorer countries, organisations in richer countries and regions may already have enough money, support or funding for the infrastructure around their projects.

Notwithstanding this criticism, the project organisers also acknowledge that the EU has done a lot for projects around EU citizenship and young people. They suggest support for permanent local structures which do not depend on temporary project funding and envision a balance between EU funding from centralised institutions and local organisations that can last in the long term. As the organisers have stressed, the link between local and EU institutions is yet to be strengthened in order to conduct successful projects. The youth welfare service in Leipzig, for example, does not want to pay for structured EU-related youth work. According to the Villa, this shows the continuing disconnection between EU projects on a local level and local institutions in the different member states. Therefore, it suggests that the guidelines of youth work should recognise international youth work as a mandatory part of youth work and that each region, local community and municipality should be proactive in the recognition of the link between international and local projects. Another demand is to have more local involvement using more channels and structures.

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## 7 Conclusion

Taking into account the complicated context conditions, the Villa considers the project a success. It reached many pupils and deepened their knowledge about the EU. The feedback from the young people was very positive, and the schools were interested in participating in follow-up projects. However, due to the pandemic, most of the workshops and project days took place in cities and not in rural areas. Besides this, the uneven access to digital infrastructure made it more difficult to reach pupils in public schools than those in private schools. Because of the overall positive results, the organisation continues to plan and to realise youth dialogues. It applied for EU funding for a new project called *Together we create Europe*, similar to the one described. Moreover, it continues to offer workshops for schools together with the European House in Leipzig (Europa-Haus Leipzig 2022).

The Villa hopes for a better organisation of the funding and the costs for workshops. It sees the necessity of better educating pupils about the EU, implementing project workshops, like the ones described, on a regular basis in the future. As long as this is not the case, the Villa is trying to empower young people by building knowledge around EU topics. In the long run, the goal is to create confident individuals who will bring society forward. Besides this, the Villa wants to stir young people's interest in the work of the European Union and show them that it may not be perfect but that young people themselves can participate in EU politics and create change.

The project organisers underline that people willing to carry out individual projects need to embed their work in suitable structures to guarantee a long-lasting impact. Those interested in more permanent work with young people in EU matters should look not only at the international level, but also at the local level and then find the structures or co-funding needed to network with others.

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## Part III

# Recommendations for Different Audiences



# How to Enhance EU Citizenship in the Rural Areas of East Central Europe: Recommendations for Governments and Regional Authorities

Astrid Lorenz 

## 1 Introduction

The EU seems to be aware of the need to bring young people closer to European politics. Over the years, it has increased the budget of Erasmus+, a funding scheme for youth exchange programmes and other projects. It also strengthened its cooperation with the European Youth Forum—a platform of national youth councils and international youth organisations. Programmes like Erasmus+ are intended to ‘improve the skills level of young people, support their participation in democratic life and in the labour market, and promote active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, social inclusion and solidarity’ (European Parliament 2022). The European Youth Strategy 2019–2027 is another instrument to develop a common approach to include European youth, their needs and wishes in EU policy-making. However, the EU does not have the competence to shape all policies relevant for the implementation of this strategy, and the pure existence of its framework and support tools cannot guarantee that their intentions are realised.

The present chapter deals with the question of how the EU approach can be supported and implemented in a more systematic manner to provide all young EU citizens equal opportunities to use their formal rights. In doing so, it focuses on national governments but also regional authorities in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania as the five countries studied in this volume. This does not mean that these countries form a region of similar ‘problematic cases’ that need particular supervision and advice. Instead, the approach is based on the assumption that in general, ‘all support mechanisms need to be tailored to the context of a given country’ (see p. 6 in Bárta 2020). Thus, since the living conditions across Europe are diverse, reaching a common goal might require different methods or supportive measures.

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The contribution first briefly describes the EU youth strategy with particular attention to the challenges of developing a joint policy in a complex multi-level system with diverse context conditions in which the EU does not have relevant own policy competences. Afterwards, it sketches out five policy recommendations with particular attention to macro-regional as well as subregional peculiarities. They refer to the experiences and empirical patterns described in the previous chapters and are based on additional analyses of certain aspects, as well as studies on democracy and the region. Finally, a brief conclusion and outlook follow.

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## **2 The EU Youth Strategy and the Complex Multi-Level Policy Setting**

Since the late 1980s, aspirations have grown in the EU to coordinate youth-related concerns across EU member states. However, the Union does not have competences in the fields of public education and youth work. Thus, it ‘can only complement and support national youth policies’ (see p. 140 in Banjac 2014). This is why the EU tried and tries to bring many actors and agencies across all levels of its multi-level system together to develop a general framework for a youth policy. The policy framework is then implemented in a similarly complex way—‘on the European level through relatively new modes of governance, namely the Open Method of Coordination which is a non-binding, intergovernmental framework for cooperation and policy exchange, and through the Structured Dialogue which serves as a forum for continuous joint reflection between young people and policymakers across the EU in the youth field’ (see p. 140 in Banjac 2014). These actors are not always working hand in hand, even if they come from one country (de Hofmann-van Poll 2022).

In 2017 and 2018, participants of the sixth cycle of the EU’s ‘Structured Dialogue’ with young people, decision-makers, researchers and other stakeholders at the local, national and EU level elaborated the so-called European Youth Goals. One of the 11 goals was ‘Moving Rural Youth Forward’. This meant ‘to ensure equality for young people in urban and rural settings’ and ‘creating conditions which enable young people to access their rights and fulfil their potential in rural areas’. More specifically, this goal was intended to be reached by ensuring an appropriate infrastructure in rural areas, sustainable, high-quality jobs, the decentralisation of different activities by, for and with young people, the active participation of young people in rural areas in decision-making processes and equal access to high-quality education and establishing a positive image of rural areas and protecting rural traditions (Council of the EU 2018).

The EU’s ‘Youth Strategy 2019–2027’ adopted in 2018 included these goals and invited national and EU decision-makers ‘with due regard to the subsidiarity’ to ‘draw inspiration’ from them. The strategy mentioned as ‘core areas of the youth sector’ in quite general terms to engage, to connect and to empower people (Council of the EU 2018). For the EU level, existing programmes and funds, such as student exchanges, the European Solidarity Corps, European Structural and Investment Funds or Horizon 2020, should be used to realise the strategy. Evidently, the

member states were not obliged by the framework paper to take particular measures. Thus, the EU depends on the willingness of national partners to cooperate.

As one instrument to encourage further coordination, the ‘EU Youth Dialogues’ were established<sup>1</sup> ‘with the aim of including more decision-makers and young people, especially those not-listened-to and/or with fewer opportunities in decision-making processes and the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy, fostering their engagement and their political participation with the EU and society at large’ (see p. 6 in Council of the EU 2018). From January to July 2020, events and projects within the seventh Youth Dialogue dealt with the sub-topic opportunities for rural youth, including the European Youth Conference. Taking up some of the results, the Council of the EU adopted in May 2020 the ‘Conclusions on Raising Opportunities for Young People in Rural and Remote Areas’. With this document, it renewed its invitation to decision-makers at all levels to ‘include in relevant strategies and policies, where appropriate, action plans or measures which reflect young people’s perspective and views in rural and remote areas’ (Council of the EU 2020).

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### 3 Policy Recommendations

While the EU has opened up to youth participation, it has not yet reached out to the large majority of young people who are not organised (Pušnik and Banjac 2022) and not informed about EU issues. The Council of the EU has repeatedly called the member states to use synergies between its own and the EU youth measures for a broader engagement. In the ‘Conclusions on Raising Opportunities for Young People in Rural and Remote Areas’ adopted in May 2020, it renewed its invitation to decision-makers at all levels to use ‘synergies between different EU initiatives and instruments in the youth field and beyond’ (Council of the EU 2020). The following section presents five policy recommendations for actors in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. They sketch out how they could support the EU youth strategy to ensure that their young citizens, especially in rural areas, have the same opportunities to use EU citizenship rights and to effectively represent their interests in EU politics as their peers in other regions.

#### **Recommendation 1: National teaching, youth work and funding programmes should include EU-related issues on an obligatory basis**

In the 2021 European Parliament (EP) Youth Survey, people between 16 and 30 years of age were asked how much they feel they understood about the European Union. Of the respondents across the EU member states, 55% indicated that they do understand not very much or nothing at all about the EU. In the Czech

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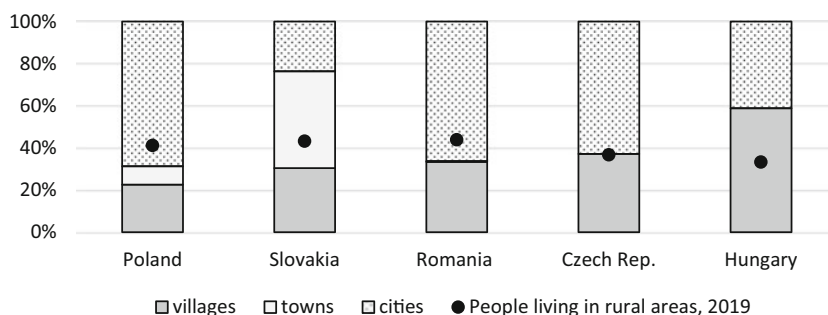
<sup>1</sup>The instrument was not really new but built on the previous ‘structured dialogue’, which is reflected by the continued counting on a seventh Youth dialogue following the sixth ‘structured dialogue’.



Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, it was even 63–64% of the respondents (see p. 13 in European Parliament 2021). These data are supported by the fieldwork and interviews for this volume. Many students in our 20 group discussions in very peripheral areas, especially those in professional high schools, showed a limited awareness of EU policies and the rights connected with EU citizenship. Nearly none of all 171 students participating had ever heard about the Conference on the Future of the EU which in principle had been very open to participation.

Therefore, to ensure even access to EU-related knowledge all over Europe and in all regions of the member states should be a key task for national governments. While the EU is covered by the curricula of secondary education, in practice it often plays a limited role. Interviewees in the Czech Republic and Slovakia argued that this is related to the fact that the schools can partly decide on what is *de facto* taught. This corroborates analyses of citizenship education in general. A study on the Czech Republic states that it is ‘marginalized on both school and national level, and much of the needed support for teachers willing to teach citizenship education in a participative way is provided by non-profit organizations that are not systematically supported and struggle with their own existence’ (see p. 112 in Urbanová 2016). However, schools in rural areas were reported in several chapters of this volume to be often not willing to cooperate with EU-related projects, especially in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. As mentioned several times by project organisers interviewed for this volume, linking different EU-related measures, like school education and civil projects or national and EU-related youth work, is generally still missing. Often the linkages only consist in the fact that individual actors take on several tasks, e.g. being a teacher and at the same time active in an NGO conducting a Youth Dialogue project.

Therefore, governments and parliaments should ensure that EU politics, rights and how to make one’s voice heard in Brussels are really taught at all schools. Instruments to reach this include clearer provisions in the national curricula and a stronger supervision of teachers or pupils’ competences. Additional measures would be helpful to underline that the governments are taking the issue seriously. For example, the Romanian Ministry of Education has repeatedly organised a national competition called ‘The European School’. Another instrument would be to recognise in the guidelines of national youth work EU-related issues and cooperation as a mandatory part, as it is suggested by the representatives of the East German NGO Die Villa (Jolly and Fikejzl in this volume). A next step could be to pay national subsidies for youth councils, NGOs or schools and public authorities if a certain share of EU-related projects is provided on a regular basis. This could include the ‘high politics’ of Brussels but also local topics related to EU policies or digital discussions with pupils or youth councils in other EU member states on issues they are interested in. In this way, young people would be encouraged to deal with the EU multi-level system and EU politics, and this might also enhance interest in national and local politics.



**Fig. 1** Total share of funding for Erasmus+ Youth Dialogue projects in ECE countries for coordination organisations in villages, towns and cities, 2019–2020. Own calculation, based on data in the Erasmus+2022 and Eurostat 2022 (inhabitants 2019). In Figure 1, municipalities were classified as villages if they have up to 50,000 inhabitants, as towns if they have up to 100,000 inhabitants and as cities if they are larger

### **Recommendation 2: The countries should encourage and support initiatives in peripheral areas to ensure an appropriate share of EU-related projects in rural areas**

The EU has not only called on member states in general to use synergies but has made specific suggestions on how to do so. In the ‘Youth Strategy 2019–2027’, the Council of the EU invited them, for example, to explore synergies between *funding sources* at EU, national, regional and local levels. Besides this, it demanded that young people and youth organisations should be actively engaged in the design, implementation and evaluation of relevant EU funding programmes (Council of the EU 2018). The EU strives to reach target groups via national platforms and youth organisations. Projects and events have been supported by Erasmus+ funding, for example, in its key action ‘Support for policy reform’, involving the action-type ‘Youth Dialogue projects’. A couple of such projects conducted in 2019 were described in this volume. Although the programme is open to all applicants, at least for the East Central European countries, just a few of the funded projects were coordinated by organisations in rural areas.

In general, the Erasmus+ funding sum per country correlated very highly ( $0.87^2$ ) with the respective number of inhabitants. The uneven distribution thus refers mainly to the *subnational* level. As Fig. 1 reveals, in Poland, Romania and Slovakia, the share of funding that organisations in villages received for European Youth Dialogue projects in 2019 and 2020 was lower than the share of people who are living in rural areas. In Slovakia, a relatively large proportion of beneficiary organisations was registered in (medium size) towns. While such locations are closer to remote rural areas, it is unclear if the respective organisations really reach out to these regions. Moreover, in some countries, like Hungary, beneficiaries in some

<sup>2</sup>Own calculation based on the data in Fig. 1.

villages received funding for several projects (a pattern observable also for other categories of settlement) but do certainly not represent the entire rural population.<sup>3</sup> As it was reported by nearly all project organisers in this volume, most people in rural peripheries do not know about the possibilities of EU funding.

Given this situation, the second recommendation to actors in East Central Europe is to ensure that more NGOs and citizens in rural areas—especially in peripheral ones—apply for projects and benefit from the EU budget that the Union receives from the member states to realise projects which bring the EU closer to its citizens. To reach this, Eurodesk and other access points for information about the EU and its programmes could receive extra national (or regional) money if it goes to the villages and smaller towns or to schools to promote applications and offer advice. An alternative would be to support *national* networks of (paid) funding consultants, in addition to the Eurodesk.

Other tools to ensure that organisations in rural areas receive a proportional share of EU funding are to enhance capacity-building. In the countries under study, civil society organisations are still rather weak (Kutter and Trappmann 2010). Weak awareness of the need for a civil sector and the rather low social prestige of NGOs go hand in hand with often limited financial resources. This is why civil society actors in these countries lack influence on the agenda of transnational networks (see p. 60 *ibid.*). Therefore, it is suitable to provide investments from the state budget for those people from rural areas who intend to engage in EU-related projects of informal education and plan to apply for the first time for EU funding for such a project. Investment means that the later benefits from the action (here a better allocation of resources across all national types of settlement) will significantly exceed the costs of support. The instrument of paying ‘seed money’ is used, for example, by universities or the German federal state to encourage applications for large EU projects in sciences. It helps to create the organisational basis for the application and to develop the content of the projects. Another well-established instrument in Germany to stimulate the acquisition of large EU funding projects is to give applicants for EU projects extra money in case of success (and to announce this in advance). Especially for the target group of young beneficiaries from remote rural areas who often lack the resources for projects, this tool would set the incentives for applications to a substantial degree.

### **Policy Recommendation 3: Information about EU issues through social media should be increased**

Many contributions in this volume revealed that young people in the remote rural areas of the countries under study feel there’s a long distance to the EU centres of policy-making. This is not an exclusive feature of rural areas. While the options for citizen participation in the EU have enlarged and are ‘relatively accessible’, they are

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<sup>3</sup>In Hungary, this was the Children’s and Young People’s Oncology Centre in Hódmezővásárhely with four projects in 2019 and 2020 and in the Czech Republic the SEVER Centre of Ecological Education in Horní Maršov (two projects).

**Table 1** Sources from which people aged 16 to 30 get most of their information on political and social issues (%)

	EU-27	CZ	HU	PL	RO	SK
Social media	41	49	47	51	45	49
News websites (newspaper/TV news websites)	41	60	40	51	45	46
News or current affairs programmes on TV	34	41	21	31	37	44
Friend, family or colleagues	26	20	29	28	26	30
News or current affairs programmes on the radio	20	11	14	20	23	19
School/college/university	25	17	11	11	14	15
Printed newspapers or magazines	14	11	12	6	9	10
Adverts or other information produced by political parties	10	7	16	7	13	8
Books/journals	9	5	8	9	6	7
Another source	12	13	10	9	11	11

Source of data: see p. 43 in European Parliament 2021

in general ‘largely unknown among the European public’ and thus ‘often have a narrow user-base’ (see p. 6 in Hierlemann et al. 2022). People often do not feel well informed about EU politics. However, introducing a centralised strategy to change things would not be suitable because media usage is still characterised by national patterns. In the countries under study, social media are much more the preferred source of information for young people than in all EU 27 countries. This is why member state actors, especially in this region, should support the dissemination of EU-related information through social media.

In many of the group discussions reported in this volume, students referred to the relevance of social media content and influencers. Also in the 2021 European Parliament Youth Survey, nearly half of the young people in the region covered by this volume indicated that they receive most information on political and social issues from social media and news websites (Table 1). School, college or university or printed newspaper and magazines are much less relevant for receiving information on political and social issues than in all 27 EU member states. The kind of social media which are used also differs from other countries. Facebook and YouTube are much more used in the countries under study than all over Europe. While Instagram is also prominently used, it is still less widespread than in other EU countries. Twitter, TikTok and WhatsApp are also much less widespread than abroad (see p. 46 in European Parliament 2021<sup>4</sup>).

In sum, digitalisation and using the right digital channels might provide a chance for better reaching out to young people inside and outside rural areas (see Anders in this volume). However, it is not a solution as such but should be adjusted to the diversity of living conditions (see also Pentzold and Stein in this volume) and the

<sup>4</sup>The EU survey did not cover media which are widespread in the region, like Telegram.

interests of the target group. The dissemination of EU-related information must also respect media freedom and the plurality of views and opinions on the topic. Therefore, it should be organised by independent agencies under the supervision of a pluralist board. Alternatively, youth and rural organisations could receive a budget to disseminate information through social media channels in their field of action because they know their target groups of young people and people in rural areas best. This was often mentioned by Youth Dialogue organisers interviewed for this volume. The allocation of money for this task could be monitored by a pluralistic supervisory body. This would help to build mutual trust and trust in the quality of the presented information, which is often relatively low regarding the public media in the country under study, when compared to other EU countries (see p. 49 in European Parliament 2021).

**Policy Recommendation 4: The countries should improve language education or engage in improving AI translation tools for social media regarding EU issues**

Being able to make one's voice heard within the EU multi-level systems (both at EU level and in transnational contacts) depends also on the capacity to communicate without the loss of information. Often, English is perceived as the lingua franca. However, four of the countries under study in this volume (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania) belong to the lower third of EU member states with regard to the share of respondents who declared in the 2021 EP Youth Survey to be able to have a conversation in English (see p. 54 in European Parliament 2021). For talking about complex and nuanced issues like the future of the EU or policy preferences, a conversational level is still not enough (see p. 140 f. in Hierlemann et al. 2022).

While the EU translates its main documents to all official languages, this is not true for many websites with information on programmes, funding or participation. The same is true for social media apps. While they have improved their translation tools, translations are still often poor (especially with less frequently used languages) because they do not recognise the different meanings of words depending upon the respective context of the post. Moreover, Instagram or other social media help users to read other languages by translating written texts, but not with writing comments in another language.<sup>5</sup> This means that social media apps in general cannot be used sufficiently for advanced political discussions.

It was clearly observed that language restrictions obstruct opportunities for using the formal rights of participation. All Youth Dialogue project organisers interviewed for this volume mentioned that a limited command of the English language hampers

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<sup>5</sup>TikTok, for example, can translate captions and comments but not the texts in videos or posts (sometimes, there are subtitles). This makes communicating less comfortable without a common basis of language. Instagram, as another example, can only translate the descriptions of posts but not videos or texts inside videos and posts and comments. If contacts via social media lead to closer communication via Instagram DM (direct messages) or other web messengers, no translations exist.

the use of advanced EU projects, which include consultations with EU policy-makers or international exchanges. This is also true for the use of participation offers provided by the EU. Language restrictions thus ‘have knock-on effects for the representativeness of the submissions received—not merely in terms of a geographical balance, but also regarding other demographic factors. When consultations are available only in English, French and German, this effectively allows for contributions from highly-educated multilingual citizens from all over Europe, while the “ordinary public” can only participate from English-, French- or German-speaking countries’ (see p. 141 in Hierlemann et al. 2022). The effects are far-reaching. Consultations are in general dominated by stakeholders from member states in northern and western Europe (Alemanno 2020). This challenge is not addressed adequately in many publications or policy recommendations dealing with youth participation (e.g. in Fennes and Gadinger 2021).

To ensure that their population can effectively use their EU citizen rights, governments must guarantee that students of all schools in all regions enjoy the same access to appropriate language education. This will probably take its time. A highly effective way to compensate for language restrictions, also in the near future, would be to make AI translation tools for translating content from EU websites—including videos—into the local language even more popular and accessible to a broad national public, e.g. via their own websites. Moreover, professional translation tools should be promoted and offered for all national actors who deal with EU issues, including schools, administrative bodies or NGOs. Finally, the countries can engage in improving AI language tools for videos, messengers, oral communication and other forms of dialogue. Transnational cooperation between the countries would be suitable to drive this process and to use synergies.

### **Policy Recommendation 5: National digital information campaigns and online voting should be used to increase willingness to participate in European Parliament elections**

To participate in elections is the easiest way of political participation. This view is supported by an even higher share of people aged 16 to 30 in the five countries under study than in the EU 27 (44.2% compared to 41%) according to the abovementioned EP Youth Survey (see p. 34 in European Parliament 2021). However, electoral turnout for European Parliament elections is often very low in these countries when compared to West European member states. This can lead to a representation deficit which reinforces a lack of willingness to use the benefits of EU citizen rights. It would be in the interest of national actors to ensure that the interests of all people of a country have the same chance to be heard at the EU level.

In the fieldwork of the Leipzig Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence (JMCoE) reported in this volume, we conducted a survey of pupils in very peripheral areas. The participants were class-mates of those 16- to 17-year-old students who took part in the group discussions (see Will and Vogel in this volume). We asked them a

question that was also included in the EP Youth Survey.<sup>6</sup> An overwhelming majority of the 265 respondents (84.2%) in our survey indicated that they would be more inclined to participate in the next EP elections if more information were provided on the impact of the EU on their daily lives. Ranking in the second place, 78.2% of the pupils indicated that they would be more inclined to vote if voter registration could be easily done online. Around 77.2% answered they would do so if more information were provided on the programmes and objectives of the candidates and parties in the European Parliament. Around 76.4% would be more inclined to participate in EP elections if EU citizens were more involved in the decision-making processes within the Union and 67.2% if they received better information about the candidates for President of the European Commission.<sup>7</sup>

A comparison with the 2021 EP Youth Survey results indicates that these measures could be especially useful to make EP elections more representative regarding the particular target group of young people in very peripheral areas. While the answers that were given most frequently in our survey ranked also on the top in the EU-wide Youth Survey (in another ranking), the share of the two most preferred measures to increase the inclination to vote in EP elections was much higher with our 16–17-year-old pupils in very peripheral areas than in the EU 27 countries and the respondents from the countries under study in the EP Youth Survey. For example, the share of those who declared that providing more information on everyday life would increase their inclination to vote in EP elections was much higher when compared to what the respondents from all over Slovakia (+19 percentage points), the Czech Republic (+14) and Hungary (+7) answered in the EP Youth Survey. The share of our students that found online voter registration increasing their motivation to vote was much higher than the respective share of all respondents in the 2021 EP Youth Survey from the Czech Republic (+13) and Hungary (+9).

Based on these data, two measures would be suitable, especially with regard to young people in very rural areas, to ensure a higher voter turnout: firstly, national digital information campaigns on elections, showing the impact of the EU on the life of citizens in rural regions, for example (like the funding of local infrastructural projects), and demonstrating the possibilities to be involved in EU politics, and, secondly, the possibility of online voting. However, in principle, these recommendations also correspond with the wishes of the EU 27 youth in general.

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<sup>6</sup>The question was: “The following measures could be taken to increase the turnout in European elections. In your opinion, how likely is it that each of the following measures would make you more inclined to vote in the next European Parliament elections?”

<sup>7</sup>These measures to increase the turnout in EP elections were ranked before the nomination of more young candidates; however, these measures also received high support by 63.8% of respondents. Other measures were supported by a lower share.

## 4 Conclusion

This chapter started with the observation that the EU is increasingly aware of the need to bring young people closer to European politics, mirrored by the European Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and other instruments to develop a common approach to include European youth. At the same time, it depends on the support by the member states to implement this strategy because it lacks its own competences to shape all relevant policies. The aim was to address the question of how the member states (more specifically, the actors in East Central Europe) can contribute to providing all young EU citizens equal opportunities to use their formal rights. In answering the question, the chapter referred to several findings of JMCoE fieldwork and other survey data.

Recommendation 1 was to include EU-related issues in national teaching, youth work and funding programmes on an obligatory basis and to increase the supervision of what young people really know about the EU. Recommendation 2 was that the countries should encourage and support initiatives in peripheral areas to ensure an appropriate share of EU-related projects in rural areas, e.g. by capacity-building. This includes financial support which is an investment because the benefit from this support for including rural areas better will exceed the costs. Policy recommendation 3 was that information about EU issues in social media should be increased. The main reason is that young people in the countries under study prefer social media to other sources for getting information about political and social issues. Policy recommendation 4 was that the member states should improve language education or engage in improving AI translation tools for social media regarding EU issues because language skills are a main precondition for using one's citizen rights. Policy recommendation 5 was to use national digital information campaigns and develop online voting to increase the willingness to participate in European Parliament elections. This would not only address a particular wish of the target group of this volume but would also serve the interest of other young people all over the EU.

All in all, the chapter shows that measures to support rural youth and to encourage it to use its European citizenship do not necessarily have to be very costly. A regulation, like that mentioned in Recommendation 1, or cooperation with NGOs, like that mentioned in Recommendation 4, helps to keep the costs within limits and to use synergies. A support measure for better providing accessible information about the EU, for example, would also serve in the capacity-building of youth-oriented NGOs in rural areas which is necessary to improve their access to EU funding. To develop these ideas further could be the programme of national projects or international workshops with the participation of the target group, which itself would help to enhance EU citizenship and bring awareness to the ways of realising democratic participation. Universities could systematically accompany such efforts and examine which measures are particularly effective. Including such accompanying research in the study programmes would also allow students to apply methodological tools and at the same time enlarge their knowledge about the empirical conditions of EU citizenship. To enhance EU citizenship can thus take different forms.



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# Perspectives for Digital Participation in Rural Areas: Evidence from German Regions

Veronika Stein  and Christian Pentzold 

## 1 Introduction

Rural development is a core concern of European policy initiatives that foster the implementation of information and communications technology (ICT) together with civic participation. The LEADER approach is one of the most notable and long-standing of such programmes. An important starting point for this liaison of technology and participation was the 2016 Cork Declaration 2.0. It calls for policies to unleash the potential offered by rural connectivity and digitisation. By treating ICT as an opportunity to overcome rural challenges and improve the quality of life, the associated ‘smart village’ concept is gaining prominence in the rural development agenda, too (ENRD 2019). However, to be smart does not only mean to appreciate digital technologies but to pay attention to local conditions and the diversity of rural areas which in fact has led to multiple ideas of what a smart village really is or should be. Apart from this, characteristic building blocks can be identified. This concerns the use of digital tools but mainly refers to a community which takes the initiative for shaping their local circumstances, thus making the smart village just as smart as its citizens who can enjoy their own rights and opportunities.

We want to join the discussion not with questions of definition but advice for practical implementation, paying attention to local community involvement and participation. While visions about the smart village have sparked much enthusiasm with the COVID-19 crisis as a further catalyst, it is still an under-researched topic with a dearth of in-depth insights. In order to derive our recommendations, the focus of this chapter rests on the civic use of digital applications, in particular in terms of emulating and fostering participation. Our recommendations, which especially regard young people as one of the target groups, are based on case studies from rural areas in Eastern and Western Germany.

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## 2 Rural Areas: The 'Smart' Way

The many challenges of rural areas are well known. Although they may not be equally pronounced or urgent in every country, rural regions in Eastern and Central Europe are struggling with out-migration with especially young people leaving for urban areas (ENRD 2021). Securing and maintaining jobs is another challenge, yet it is precisely the professional prospects that make urban areas more attractive (Auclair and Vanoni 2004). This can intensify the demographic trends of population loss and aging. Adding to this is the declining provision of infrastructure and an overall poor socio-economic environment, which is particularly evident for Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, the Baltic States, Poland, parts of the Czech Republic and some of the eastern regions of Germany (ENRD 2021). These downward trends reinforce each other and raise questions about the future viability of rural regions which previous political interventions have only been able to address to a limited extent.

In facing these challenges and thinking about rural development in a 'smart' way, two major trends can be distinguished. Firstly, there are changes in the strategic direction of rural development, one that accounts for the enormous diversity of rural regions (Neumeier 2017). The insufficiency of top-down policies suggests a shift towards endogenous regional development. However, relying on a region's genuine resources can, in fact, deepen the existing disadvantages which is why neo-endogenous approaches have called for a balanced interplay of external and internal resources (Biczkowski 2020; Terluin 2003). In that respect, the EU promotes regional development with a variety of funding and policy instruments with the LEADER approach as one of the most forceful expressions of present rural development strategies.

Secondly, with the diffusion of ICT, harnessing the digital transformation for regional development is both a blessing and a curse. Technology levers are championed as a means to combat the penalty of being rural, yet at the same time providing such infrastructures becomes a major concern. With regard to the EU context, the emphasis on ICT adoption and access can date back to the Cork Declaration 2.0 in 2016. The declaration acknowledged the problematic state of rural areas, specifically the urban-rural divide, rural exodus and youth drain, where ICT may help to address such challenges. Hence, smart village conceptions are associated with 'the potential of rural areas and resources to deliver on a wide range of economic, social and environmental challenges and opportunities benefiting all European citizens' (see p. 1 in ENRD 2016).

EU policy is an important factor in this process, which conceives the smart village as an object of political decision-making and support. In this view, smart villages are home to 'rural citizens taking the initiative to find practical solutions [and] using digital technologies when they are appropriate' (see p. 7 in ENRD 2018), whereby digital technologies are not only perceived as new opportunities but understood as indispensable for the development of rural regions that are home to smart citizens thriving on the available socio-technical affordances.

Apart from EU policy and its priorities, the notion of smart villages has also found its way into academic research that examines a wide range of ICT applications for

civic purposes (for overviews, see Sustainability Special Issue 2022; Guzal-Dec 2018; Patnaik et al. 2020; Visvizi et al. 2019; Zavrtnik et al. 2018). When it comes to prerequisites, Wolski and Wójcik state that ‘creating structures, environments, and climates at the local level’ is necessary (see p. 40 in 2019). Similarly, Slee proposes that ‘a smart village could thus be thought of as one that has confronted developmental challenges successfully to increase its resilience, often using social innovation as the basis of such practices and ventures’ (see p. 636 in 2019). In exploring the relationship between rural areas and their residents, references are also made to the smart citizen and explicitly to a ‘smart citizenship’ (e.g. see Calzada 2020). In a narrower context, the role of ICT and, for example, digital rights are emphasised, while a broader understanding of citizenship includes the empowerment of citizens and their active engagement within the local community.

For all its manifold instantiations, research and policymaking agree on the point that smart village ventures require technical structures as well as social structures where smart villages ‘build on their own existing strengths’ (see p. 7 in ENRD 2018). Just as regional development takes diversity into account and rejects a one-size-fits-all solution, so does the smart village. In particular, ICT and a more participatory stance are believed to help reach and mobilise younger people. Yet while young people thus feature prominently in these schemes and their justifications, they are nevertheless difficult to reach, and actively involving them and ensuring their participation is far from straightforward. In light of the fact that more than 90% of young people in the EU use the Internet on a daily basis, they might be particularly responsive to digital tools and come to engage in rural development processes as digital citizens (Collin 2015; Eurostat 2022; Mossberger et al. 2008).<sup>1</sup>

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### 3 Context and Material

The recommendations we offer in this chapter stem from case studies in three rural areas in East Germany and West Germany within the framework of a research project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (Universität Leipzig 2022). The project is guided by the general research question on how participation processes in rural regions can be designed digitally, also taking into account effective combinations with offline formats. The research was conducted between 2021 and 2022; the selected case regions were part of policy schemes, e.g. as part of LEADER or connate national strategies which support the idea of smart villages.

Since 1991, the European Union’s LEADER programme has been promoting local development concepts. For post-socialist states, its policies and funding opportunities have been implemented as part of their EU membership. In turn, the approach is recognised as an element of Europeanisation that influences policy

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<sup>1</sup>See also the chapter by Astrid Lorenz in this volume.

processes, institutions and politics (Ray 2006; Székely 2017). In contrast to top-down government, the empowerment and participation of local actors lies at the heart of the LEADER concept. This bottom-up approach includes the creation of area-based Local Action Groups (LAGs), which are multi-sectoral partnerships operating throughout the EU to support participatory local development in rural areas, and the local community itself. By now, there are 3134 LEADER regions in total, with, for example, about 300 LAGs in Germany and in Poland, circa 250 in Romania, 180 in the Czech Republic and 100 in Hungary and Slovakia (ENRD 2022).

There are links between existing EU funding such as LEADER and the smart village concept, i.e. the focus on innovation and community-led actions (see p. 64 in Nieto and Brosei 2019). In fact, LEADER is an instrument to realise the vision through advice and grants so to support smart villages, and LAGs have started to use digital participation (see p. 40 in ENRD 2018). This is not limited to the European level but in line with global initiatives and tendencies, and it is promoted on a country-specific basis even when these do not use the same nomenclature. Smart villages in Poland and Germany and the EU project Smart Rural 21 are such programmes. As mentioned, the common aim is to promote regional development with the help of the local community coupled with an emphasis on the benign use of ICT.

The reported results are based on an analysis of official documents from the regions, three to four interviews of local stakeholders per region, focus groups and participant observations. The stakeholders are responsible for managing and servicing local actions and can serve as intermediaries. As such, they maintain important links between top-down schemes and the local population (Wolski and Wójcik 2019). Accordingly, representing the level of government closest to citizens, they play a crucial role in encouraging citizens' participation and promoting European values around active participation, democratic aspirations and the making of a viable future.

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## **4 Recommendations for Local Actors**

Based on case studies, we have formulated recommendations for civic participation in rural regional development with a particular focus on reaching target groups. They can be applied to offline-only endeavours, but we particularly highlight and demonstrate the added value of using digital participation.

### **4.1 Communicate Relevance and Set Task-Related Goals**

With the bottom-up approach in mind, a key concern in the rural regions we studied was to involve the local population in regional development issues. The most important prerequisite for participation is the phase before the actual participation which must prioritise the provision and dissemination of information. For prompting

active participation, the initial goal is to communicate relevance to the intended target groups.

On this token, it was apparent in the case studies that people were more likely to participate when it became clear to them that they were directly affected by the outcome. Furthermore, the reason for participation activities had to be made explicit and tied to tangible projects. Accordingly, offering information did not only include highlighting the added value for participants but also providing information about the conditions and concrete goals of an initiative. This applies to projects on the federal, state or EU level but also regarding regional ventures that also needed to provide reasons for people to join and carry them out.

This too implies to stress the significance of a project within a region and the positive outcomes that accrue from it, for example, with respect to creating job opportunities or enhancing the image of the region so to perhaps attract younger people. In fact, when it comes to the form of address, a target-group-specific approach is particularly effective. Hence, young people can be better reached with social media, and specific apps are also increasingly being used in Germany, for example, the app *Digitale Dörfer*. The aim then is to communicate the future viability of a region with more personal messages and no institutional jargon. In the regions we studied, due to the need to communicate more and before the start of an actual initiative, an increasing amount of the project budgets had been dedicated to information and communication, compared to the implementation and support of participation. Since it is important in this phase to spread information via many outlets, digital channels function as a supplement which is potentially able to not only reach more citizens but also groups hitherto untouched by official publications and local press, like younger people.

Closely related to communicating relevance is the observation that intermediaries must consider in advance what goal is to be achieved through participation. Digital participation offerings, like those offline, need to have a task-related objective and be no end in themselves. More than serving legitimization purposes, this requires some level of openness towards the course of the process and its outcomes. For example, in our case studies, participants had negative experiences when asked to select only from a pre-identified menu of challenges and fields of action, instead of coming up with new thoughts, for instance, with the help of open-ended questions. This however requires that the intermediaries involved have some agency to take up the impulses from the population. Digital participation can only be effective if the public administration is willing and able to listen to the suggestions, proposals and demands from the citizens, to transfer them into corresponding political actions and to implement them.

Trust and transparency are certainly two issues here whose foundations should be laid in the beginning and are difficult to rewire at a later stage. For later phases, communication then could turn its focus to feedback which helps to give participants the sense that their input is important and makes a difference in the manifest results. Again, digital tools might help to communicate such kind of feedback. In case intermediaries knew what goals they want to achieve with participation and are open to its results, it was also easier to convince the local population of its benefits,

so it was one insight of our study. In case the administration acted as a catalyst and positive example, the local community was able to sense the motivation of those involved. Overall, the emphasis on the relevance of the citizens' input increased transparency and created the basis for building trust between the actors involved. As our respondents kept stressing, when such a foundation was laid in the initial phase, the commitment of those involved remained stronger during the ongoing process.

## 4.2 Exploiting Synergy Effects

The second recommendation that can be taken from our case studies points us to the harnessing of synergy effects and, if necessary, activities towards centralisation. Exploiting synergy effects is also a matter of productively using and expanding existing social networks.

A major challenge, especially in larger, sparsely populated regions with scattered information sources, was to gain an overview of the activities and respective partners. A means to address it that has been mentioned several times are digital information and communication services that can sustain networking efforts. Especially when there are many initiatives in the region with overlaps, e.g. youth work, participation projects, volunteers and civic associations, it makes sense to bundle such activities together and provide a common overview or gateway for information and contact. It has been shown, for example, that participation could be increased as soon as the offerings were available on a common website, e.g. the general website of the region. One of our regions already had a region-specific app, which another local project then used for facilitating additional participation. In another case study, an extra association was established so to present local initiatives and projects on a website and thus to provide a central point of information and contact. In this context, cooperation was not seen as an additional expense but rather as an opportunity to pool resources and organise activities. This does not necessarily require the creation of new communicative overheads; it can also be integrated into an already existing website or services. Furthermore, some target group and topic-specific events were already realised together, e.g. from youth work, political education and regional networking, thus generating a higher attendance.

In addition, the funding landscape can become confusingly diverse as it moves on multiple federal levels or along different time horizons but often in similar directions. Here too concrete synergy effects should be taken into account, and in terms of the effective use of resources, a joint or even concerted approach for reaching goals together is advisable. Overall, the centralisation of participation offerings was deemed a success factor that hinged on the need to determine its scope and context without losing sight of a bespoke, target-group-specific approach. This also requires identifying and applying appropriate participation methods, e.g. a combination of offline activities with digitally based ventures and social media channels. And all such sought synergy effects must also acknowledge the resources of the actors involved, from citizens to intermediaries and partners. Especially in rural regions, the use of participation offerings depends on their local commitment as



well as the time, enthusiasm and money they can put into networking and sustained active engagement.

### 4.3 Use and Co-creation of Experience Spaces

The third recommendation goes beyond user orientation and synergy effects and underscores the differences between target groups. Realising rural development with place-based approaches assumes that they are strongly relying on local knowledge and resources which are held by different public administrative and private actors. For example, a previously underrepresented issue can mean different things to different target groups which may require a more responsive approach that caters to these sensibilities and exigencies. Here, ICT may facilitate exchange and networking as it allows the different groups involved or targeted to make their needs and expectations transparent and get a sense of what others would want from a local initiative or could, in turn, bring to the table to make it work.

A starting point for this was offered by the ‘experience spaces’ of young people who tend to be more active in the digital world, especially on social media and apps. These spaces allowed for a more targeted advertising for participation projects or recruitment. Meeting stakeholders and potential participants in their communicative and media habitats was not limited to digital space; offline spaces like youth parliaments or youth recreation facilities as well as event-related occasions could also play a role. To get an overview of such experience spaces in the first place, one of the regions we studied conducted a network analysis which consisted of a survey following snowball sampling. It resulted in a target-group-specific analysis and a mapping of key players from different sectors.

In addition to meeting actors at existing places, which are embedded in their everyday activities, shared spaces of experience could be created. One example from the case studies was a digital volunteer exchange. It was installed in order to relieve the workload of volunteers, address the decline in volunteerism and at the same time create incentives to take up a volunteer position by providing a low-threshold entry point. Another region was creating a joint forum with the help of a website and through a specially created club meant to bring together the ‘smart’ actors and projects of the region.

Seen together, digitisation was used here to promote offline engagement where digital space was perceived to pose a lower barrier for engagement than a brick-and-mortar venue, as suggested by the higher number of participants reached in the case regions. Furthermore, digitisation was employed to expand participation with digital offerings that allowed it to reach additional target groups. Besides this, offline opportunities such as living labs were created to potentially reduce reservations regarding digitisation. They offered spaces for joint workshops where participants had the opportunity to creatively deal with the possibilities of digitisation or acquire skills in navigating them. Such endeavours established spaces of experience not only between different actors but also between the offline and digital worlds along a

target-group-specific approach, so as to reduce reservations or provide digital competencies.

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## 5 Conclusion

In sum, digitisation can help to (re)connect the local community and to reach different target groups specifically. What is more, with digital participation offerings and digital services, local actors support (younger) citizens to actively shape a region, make it more attractive, support identification and as a result increase the likelihood of staying. Through this, people practise participation on a local level which may as well further engagement in other arenas.

Especially EU policy programmes such as LEADER open opportunities to learn about the variety of programmes at the federal, state and EU levels and promote networking and knowledge transfer as well as practising collaboration. Depending on the location of the region, we also found forms of cross-border cooperation in our case studies, e.g. within the Interreg programme. In this way, the support for cooperation can bring together local, regional, national and cross-border actors to engage and develop communal visions for rural areas.

Yet although rural development programmes are structured similarly, we must be cautious that it is key to see the ‘smart’ village as a proactive approach embedded in social practices and to emulate these practices in participatory endeavours. It has been shown that given existing participatory routines and a set of responsive citizens, digitisation can strengthen a benign circle of participatory rural development and may foster it also in regions that lack such prerequisites. In all cases, the use of digital tools must be tailored to the local population and their needs, and there is no neat, toolkit-like transfer of lessons learnt in one place to another. Rather, there is always a moment of translation and adaptation.

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# Promoting the Active Citizenship of Young People in Peripheral Regions: Recommendations for EU Key Players

Lisa H. Anders 

## 1 Introduction

In the past 20 years, EU youth policy has developed considerably. Its main objectives include promoting youth mobility, improving education and employability and fostering the active EU citizenship of young people across EU member states by providing information and opportunities for participation and exchange.

A challenge for EU youth policy is the regional disparities within the EU. They are reflected in substantial income differences (Widuto 2019), they concern the transport infrastructure, access to health and education and thus central areas determining the living conditions of (young) EU citizens (see Lorenz and Anders in this volume). Unlike youth in capitals and metropolitan areas, young people in rural peripheries face lower connectivity and are lacking leisure facilities and often grow up knowing that they have to leave their home for a high-quality education or reasonably paid jobs. For them, the EU does not necessarily stand for opportunities and economic prosperity, but they might as well associate it with emigration and feelings of social exclusion. Reaching these young people, informing them about their rights and opportunities as EU citizens and empowering them to make their voices heard is an important task of EU youth policy, particularly in times of growing youth disengagement (Kitanova 2019).

This chapter discusses how the European Commission and the EP as key players of the EU youth policy can improve youth work aimed at the promotion of the active citizenship of young people in peripheral regions. To do so, it builds on the findings of group discussions and interviews with the organisers of EU-related youth projects. The next section sketches the evolution of the EU youth policy and summarises its underlying principles. Section 3 then presents four policy recommendations which are summarised and discussed in the concluding section.

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## 2 The EU Youth Policy: Development and Principles

Already the founding treaty of the European Community, signed in 1957, featured the idea of promoting the exchanges of young people (more precisely, young workers). While the community introduced exchange programs in the 1980s, it was not until the end of the century that the European youth policy gained traction. In 1999, the Council stressed the need to encourage young people to become active citizens and invited the Commission and the member states to foster youth participation at both the community and the national levels (Resolution 1999/C 42/01).<sup>1</sup> The following years, the EU key players presented their ideas for an EU youth policy and established programmes to realise them. Complementing the Erasmus program, the EP and the Council introduced the “Youth Community Action Programme” to strengthen transnational exchanges and transnational community-service activities (European Parliament and Council, 2000). The Commission published the White Paper “A New Impetus for European Youth”, suggesting to organise the EU youth policy by means of the Open Method of Coordination and to consider the youth dimension in all EU policy fields (European Commission 2001). Building on this White Paper, the member states decided to apply the Open Method of Coordination in the field of youth from 2002 onwards, and they endorsed the four thematic priorities of participation, information, voluntary activities and a greater understanding of youth (Resolution 2002/C 168/02).

Since then, EU youth policy has developed considerably.<sup>2</sup> It covers a large scope of activities, and EU actors have developed a variety of programs and strategies, most recently the “European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027”. This strategy sets out youth policy objectives and instruments until 2027, grouping them around three areas of action coined “engage”, “connect” and “empower” (European Commission 2018, Resolution 2018/C 456/02). It is supposed to contribute to the realisation of the 11 “European Youth Goals” which were developed by means of a “Structured Dialogue”, a dialogue format established in 2010 to include young people in the reflections about the EU youth policy priorities.

Two main principles guide the EU youth policy and affect the strategies EU actors can choose to enhance the active EU citizenship of young people. Firstly, the EU youth policy follows a decentralised approach. Already in 2001, the Commission underlined that member states and regions “bear the brunt of putting the various youth-related measures into practice”, because it “is on the ground, where young people can see the results of their personal commitment, that active citizenship becomes a reality” (see p. 5 in European Commission 2001). Similarly, the Council underlined that youth policy should encourage “the active participation of young

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<sup>1</sup>Other official EU documents in the 1990s had already referred to youth but mostly from the perspective of education, unemployment and employability. The idea of a more encompassing youth policy promoting the active citizenship of young people was prominently discussed only at the end of the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup>For an overview on EU legislation on youth, see <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/content/summaries/summary-15-expanded-content.html>

people in the development of the local community” (Resolution 1999/C 42/01). The principle of a decentralised youth policy is also anchored in the choice of policy instruments in this field. Member states did not transfer decision-making competences to the EU level but opted for the Open Method of Coordination, a soft governance approach whereby broad common policy objectives were adopted at the EU level, then implemented by the member states and evaluated by the Commission, which aims to promote a horizontal exchange on best practices. As a result, the working of the EU youth policy depends on the national level (see Lorenz in this volume), and the amounts spent as well as the youth work infrastructure in the member states vary.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, and connected to the decentralised approach, the EU relies on informal education and cooperates with local youth organisations, associations and NGOs as well as public bodies at the local, regional and national level. Early on, EU actors declared their intention to promote informal education in the field of youth (European Parliament and Council 2000) and stressed that non-governmental youth associations and organisations provide a valuable contribution to the “development of channels for youth participation at local, regional and national level” (Resolution 1999/C 42/01). Also, the EU Youth Strategy emphasises that “EU youth cooperation should better connect with policy makers and practitioners at the regional and local level and encourage grassroots initiatives by youth” (see p. 3 in European Commission 2018). Accordingly, the youth policy relies on a “close cooperation with civil society organisations and young people” (see p. 138 in de Hofmann-van Poll 2022). To implement the EU Youth Strategy with their projects, the organisations can apply for temporary project grants within the framework of the Erasmus+ program.<sup>4</sup>

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### 3 Recommendations

The group discussions conducted for this volume provide valuable insights into how young people in peripheral areas in five EU member states perceive the EU and their rights connected to EU citizenship. The interviews with leaders of EU-funded youth projects additionally illustrate the challenges that projects to foster active citizenship face in these regions.<sup>5</sup> Based on this, the following pages discuss ways to improve existing measures to promote active EU citizenship among young people in

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<sup>3</sup>The Commission provides an overview of national youth policies in a Youth Wiki, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki>

<sup>4</sup>While Erasmus+ (see, for an overview, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/>) has an overall budget of more than 26 billion euros for the years 2021–2027, the amount indicated for youth participation projects is far lower (for instance, 17 million euros in 2021; see European Commission 2021).

<sup>5</sup>The chapters in part 2 and 3 of this volume build on 20 group discussions with young people as well as qualitative interviews with the organisers of several projects within the framework of the EU Youth Dialogue. They have been conducted in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania within the framework of the Leipzig Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence in 2022.

peripheral areas. Four policy recommendations for EU actors are presented, in particular for the Commission which plays a leading role in enhancing active EU citizenship by promoting exchanges between the member states and running the Erasmus+ program and for the European Parliament.

**Recommendation 1: Knowledge transfer tailored to the needs of young people**

EU actors are well aware that “information is indispensable to developing active citizenship”—as the Commission stated back in 2001 (see p. 13 in European Commission 2001). They provide online portals with information on the rights and freedoms of EU citizens<sup>6</sup> or videos informing people about the elections to the EP.<sup>7</sup> To reach out to young people, the Commission has come to rely on social media. There is an Instagram account giving information on youth initiatives,<sup>8</sup> a target-group-oriented website for the European Year of Youth 2022 with information on youth-related activities in the member states and links to podcasts and videos.<sup>9</sup> The Commission also provides information on the EU’s youth activities via YouTube.<sup>10</sup> Besides this, EU institutions cooperate with Eurodesk, a European youth information network with more than 2000 regional and local partners and active on all social media platforms.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of these efforts, EU citizens in general and young people do not consider themselves well informed. In a public consultation on EU citizenship rights conducted in 2020, over 60% of the respondents indicated that “not enough is being done to inform EU citizens about their citizenship rights” (see p. 1 in European Commission 2020). This was also reflected in the group discussions conducted in several schools in the rural periphery in five East Central European countries. Across the five countries, the discussions revealed that students often lack basic knowledge about the EU and the rights and freedoms connected to EU citizenship. This became evident when students reported that they had not yet heard of the elections to the EP (Stangenberger and Formánková in this volume), when they indicated that they were unaware of the exchange opportunities for high school students and apprentices (Mandru and Víg in this volume), when they had questions concerning specific EU policies and rights or when they said that they had never heard of the Conference on the Future of Europe (Stosik and Sekunda, Stangenberger and Formánková, Stangenberger, Mandru and Víg, Ferenczi and Micu, all in this volume). Obviously, measures to inform young people about their

<sup>6</sup><https://what-europe-does-for-me.eu/en/portal/2/0?area=H&txt=My-EU-rights-and-freedoms>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/elections>

<sup>8</sup>[https://www.instagram.com/european\\_youth\\_eu/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/european_youth_eu/?hl=en)

<sup>9</sup>[https://youth.europa.eu/year-of-youth\\_en#content](https://youth.europa.eu/year-of-youth_en#content)

<sup>10</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qrlv4U0Q0c4>

<sup>11</sup><https://eurodesk.eu/about/>



rights and opportunities within the EU do not reach them (compare Lorenz in this volume).<sup>12</sup>

Informing young people about the EU, its policies and the rights and opportunities associated with EU citizenship, therefore, remains a crucial task, and knowledge transfer needs to be improved by specifically tailoring it for young people. The group discussions provide valuable hints on how EU actors can contribute to accomplish this task. First, they can support national efforts to increase the importance of EU issues in formal education, something that many young people suggested in the group discussions (see Lorenz in this volume). To this end, the European Commission can foster exchanges among member states about EU education in schools, for instance, by making EU education as one of the focus topics of the European Education Area.<sup>13</sup> Besides this, it should continue to provide and to promote easily accessible teaching materials on EU-related topics.<sup>14</sup> Last but not least, it should further encourage cooperation between schools and youth organisations providing non-formal learning opportunities, for instance, by creating monetary incentives for youth organisations to cooperate with schools.

To reach the youth, the EU actors additionally need to improve their own social media strategy. Students in several group discussions revealed that they were not aware of the EU's social media offers. They reported that they would like to see more EU-related content on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok or Spotify and suggested that influencers on these platforms could play a vital role in promoting EP elections (Stangenberger and Formánková, Stangenberger, Mandru and Víg, all in this volume). Apparently, it is not enough if the Commission and the EP simply provide more information on the EU or EU youth policies through their own social media channels. They need to pay closer attention to ensuring that this information actually spreads and reaches a target group. This could be realised by tailoring knowledge transfer to the media young people use, which could mean to work with youth-oriented multipliers on social media.

### **Recommendation 2: Strengthen political efficacy through meaningful local participation linked to the EU level**

Political efficacy is defined as “the feeling that one is able to effectively participate in politics and also that her input is worthwhile” (Shore 2020). As a prerequisite for many political activities, it is crucial for active citizenship. This is recognised by the Commission which stated in its 2001 White Paper that “if young people have one

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<sup>12</sup>In fact, this does not apply exclusively to young people in rural peripheries but seems to be a more general problem of the Commission's social media content for young people. At least this is what the low numbers of views and followers suggest.

<sup>13</sup>For more information on the European Education Area, an instrument to foster collaboration among EU member states to improve their education and training systems, see <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea>

<sup>14</sup>For the various teaching materials provided by EU institutions, see [https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/index_en)

clear message, it is that they want their voice to be heard and want to be regarded as fully-fledged participants in the process” (see p. 5 in European Commission 2001).

The reports on the youth projects in this volume suggest that political efficacy can best be enhanced in local participation projects focusing on political problems that concern young people most directly and involving local decision-makers.<sup>15</sup> Youth projects dealing with local problems and involving local politicians can achieve tangible political changes (for instance, by having an additional night bus). Through such changes, young participants can experience firsthand that their political activities can make a difference and contribute in shaping their environment (Habelt and Despang in this volume).

Hence, the various local participation projects within the framework of the European Youth Strategy create a good environment for attaining citizenship competences and developing the feeling that political participation is worthwhile. At the same time, the reports reveal that meaningful participation projects—that is, inclusive projects resulting in tangible changes—and projects to foster active EU citizenship depend on a number of important factors:

Firstly, according to the organisers of youth projects, actual changes resulting of participatory projects depend to a large degree on the will of local politicians. They therefore suggest that the EU should strive to increase the motivation of local decision-makers to participate in youth dialogue projects. EU actors should appeal to political decision-makers and develop more specific guidelines on youth participation on the local level in order to “put pressure on officials to organise youth dialogues or to establish a closer relationship with young people” (see Gawron and Penzlin, Jolly and Fikejzel, both in this volume). This seems particularly important for EU member states where youth policy is not considered a political priority.

Secondly, participation projects intended to foster not only political efficacy but also active engagement in EU matters need to be linked to the EU. At an individual level, EU actors—especially the MEPs who embody the direct link between the EU and its citizens—therefore need to become active themselves. As representatives of national or regional constituencies, they can get involved in local youth projects, regularly participate and interact with the young project participants and show how they consider the needs of youth in their political work. Such a regular involvement of EU-level actors can motivate young people to actively engage in EU matters. What is important in this context is the long-term commitment of the MEPs. A single event with decision-makers from Brussels will not have the same effect.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, participation projects can only achieve meaningful results over the course of time. Young people need to be informed about participation opportunities and motivated to participate. Local and EU-level decision-makers need to be

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<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, some students stressed that they felt closer to local or national elections, as they would be more important and more relevant to their daily lives (Ferenczi and Micu in this volume).

<sup>16</sup> As some project leaders pointed out, the one-time presence of MEP’s can create a hierarchy and intimidate rather than encourage participation (Gawron and Prenzlin, Kónya, both in this volume). This is in line with previous research that stresses that any dialogue with young people and policy-makers needs to be an “ongoing and ‘real’ dialogue” (Fennes and Gadinger 2022).

convinced to devote their precious time and find a free time slot in their busy schedules, and political ideas developed in youth projects then need to be realised by the local administration or incorporated in EU-level decision-making. These processes need time, which leads to the third recommendation.

### **Recommendation 3: Ensure more reliable funding for youth projects**

Studies on youth work in the European Union show that youth workers often experience “instability or unsustainable employment conditions” (see pp. 123 in European Commission 2014). This can result in staff turnover which compromises the relationships with the young people and the smooth running of the programs (ibid.). These challenges are confirmed by the interviewed organisers of EU youth projects. The organisers of a youth project in Hungary emphasised that successful projects depend on local youth workers with established contacts, which they describe as “the key for the sustainability of a project” (Kónya in this volume). EU funds, however, do not allow for a permanent infrastructure and the staff necessary to provide sustainable youth work. As a result, the project leaders report that they have to constantly seek new sources of funding. This ties up their resources, particularly when the organisations are small (see Habelt and Despang, Gawron and Penzlin, Tadzhetdinova and Gutzer and Jolly and Fikejzl, all in this volume).<sup>17</sup> Scarce resources also impede the working of Eurodesk multipliers. While serving as important disseminators of European youth information at the regional or local level, they do not have the money to hire permanent staff for this task but need to rely on voluntary work as well (Habelt and Despang in this volume).

Sustainability in financial terms therefore seems to be the key to successful youth work aimed at fostering active EU citizenship at the local level. EU actors—particularly the European Commission responsible for running the Erasmus+ program—should therefore provide more reliable funding for EU-related youth projects. At the moment, the EU Youth Dialogue is organised into 18-month work cycles,<sup>18</sup> and youth projects funded by Erasmus+ have a duration of 2 years.<sup>19</sup> Practically, this means that many independent organisations, NGOs and associations conducting EU projects can only plan for very short periods of time and constantly have to seek for the next funding opportunity. What they need, however, to conduct projects in rural peripheries with a long-lasting effect are “permanent local structures which do not depend on temporary project funding” (Jolly and Fikejzl in this volume). In this respect, it could be an easy and good starting point if EU actors extended the work cycles of EU Youth Dialogue projects and the duration of Erasmus+ – funded projects or if they lowered the hurdles for receiving a grant for follow-up projects. Besides this, they should actively encourage member states to

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<sup>17</sup>This is in line with previous studies, which have shown that the “need for specialised fund raising and management skills may favour larger organisations with more developed infrastructure” (see p. 185 in European Commission 2014).

<sup>18</sup>[https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/euyouthdialogue\\_en](https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/euyouthdialogue_en)

<sup>19</sup>See, for instance, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-3/youth-together>

further provide public support for youth organisations working on EU issues (see Lorenz in this volume).

**Recommendation 4: Keep room for diversity and make all voices heard by improving the inclusiveness of bottom-up dialogue formats**

The group discussions with students in rural peripheries in five member states clearly showed that students do associate very different things with the EU and EU rights. While all groups agreed on peace as an important EU achievement and reported that for them the EU stands for the freedom of movement, they differed significantly in their prioritisation of other EU rights and freedoms (compare Stosik and Sekunda, Stangenberger and Formánková, Stangenberger, Mandru and Víg, Ferenczi and Micu, all in this volume). This diversity of perceptions of the rights and freedoms associated with the EU is in line with recent studies on public debates on European integration which have shown that Europe's public sphere can be described as a "justification jungle" (De Wilde 2021). There is no dominant narrative of European integration and its achievements, but speakers in public discourses use a variety of different and competing frameworks and narratives.

In terms of EU youth policy, this finding once again underscores the importance of the EU's decentralised approach (and it might as well be interpreted as a result of it). For young people in different contexts with very diverse living conditions, the EU means different things. Benefits associated with EU citizenship that are important to some appear less important to others. A youth policy aimed at strengthening young people's citizenship competences, therefore, does not need to be based on a single narrative or devoted to a unique goal but connected to the diverse realities and perceptions of young people across the Union. In this sense, the 11 European Youth Objectives seem broad enough to provide starting points for diverse projects that link European objectives with young people's local engagement in very different contexts. The EU should continue to base its youth policy on such a broad foundation which is substantiated through local projects, and EU actors should make sure that the EU youth policy priorities speak to all young people across the Union.

For that end, the EU's bottom-up approach to involve young people in the formulation of youth policy priorities through the Structured Dialogue needs to become more inclusive. The European Youth Goals developed by young people during this dialogue identify as one of its main goals to move rural youth forward (Resolution 2018/C 456/02). While this suggests that young people in rural areas across Europe have been successful in generally raising awareness for their needs and influencing the youth agenda at the European level, the exclusiveness of these Youth Dialogues remains to be a problem (Pušnik and Banjac 2022), and this problem also has a spatial dimension. As many project organisers reported, the informational and organisational infrastructure for EU-related youth work is still better in the capitals and cities than in remote areas (Tadzhedinova and Gutzer, Kónya, both in this volume).

The chances of participating in bottom-up dialogues and influencing the EU youth policy agenda are thus unevenly distributed. When conducting future Structured Dialogues, EU key players therefore need to pay particular attention to

ensure that the voices of young people in urban areas are not overrepresented and that those of young people in rural areas carry equal weight. At an individual level, they can enhance the inclusiveness of dialogue formats by actively reaching out to projects and young people in the periphery themselves. At a more structural level, they can create further incentives for decentralising the EU youth work infrastructure, for instance, by reserving a certain proportion of project funds for projects in peripheral regions. To ensure that these measures match national efforts (see Lorenz in this volume), close cooperation between the EU and national actors is needed.

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## 4 Conclusion

Active EU citizenship depends on at least three conditions. Citizens must know their rights, they must know how to use them and they must be convinced that they can make a difference. EU youth policy aims to ensure that these conditions are met by informing young people about their rights and opportunities as EU citizens and by providing them with opportunities for meaningful participation.

The recommendations for EU key actors developed in this chapter are based on exploratory research on the experiences of young people and youth organisations in remote rural areas in five EU member states. They are not intended as general guidelines for EU youth policy but more specifically as suggestions on how to improve the promotion of the active citizenship of young people in peripheral regions within the EU. Overall, the recommendations do not call for a massive revision of EU youth policy. Rather, they represent ideas to refine existing approaches.

The first recommendation provides ideas on how to disseminate information about EU youth policies to reach young people in rural peripheries. The second one underlines that it is at the local level where youth projects can provide young people with the competences and the motivation to become actively involved in (EU) politics. Creating opportunities for meaningful participation through the involvement of local stakeholders and simultaneously linking these projects to the EU level, therefore, needs to remain a key priority of EU youth policy. For that end, EU key players, particularly MEPs, should actively engage in local projects to create direct channels through which young people can experience the EU and express their needs. Of course, such a permanent local engagement is difficult to fit into the MEPs' busy schedules, but worthwhile nonetheless, given that the young people of today are the voters of tomorrow. As the lasting success of participatory youth projects at the local level depends on a number of factors—longer-term planning by experienced youth workers with local networks—the third recommendation concerns the structural conditions of youth work in the rural periphery, particularly the project funding that needs to be more reliable to allow for longer-term planning. While this makes EU youth work less flexible and limits competition for new project ideas and innovative practices, the individual youth projects are likely to become much more effective and sustainable. The last recommendation is related to the fact that the youth work infrastructure in rural peripheries is still lagging behind, resulting in

unequal chances for participation. EU actors, therefore, need to further improve the inclusiveness of bottom-up dialogue formats to make sure that the ideas of young people in these areas can carry equal weight.

EU actors alone cannot guarantee successful EU youth policies. They depend on the support of diverse national, regional and local actors. Hence, the close and continuous cooperation of all these actors in their diverse settings is needed to succeed in promoting active citizenship beyond urban centres.

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# EU Citizenship and the Young People in the Peripheral Areas of East Central Europe: Three Recommendations for Research on Citizenship

Ireneusz Paweł Karolewski 

## 1 Introduction

Citizenship has been one of the central political concepts since the inception of the Greek polis. Since then, it has gone through a myriad of transformations assuming various meanings and implying numerous normative expectations (Isin 1997) from very modest (simply having a passport) to very ambitious ones (espousing civic friendship vis-à-vis other citizens or even self-sacrifice for a community of citizens). Even though the 1990s and their concomitant globalisation hype brought about a certain scepticism about the usefulness of citizenship (e.g. Soysal 1994), more recently its relevance has become quite evident, in particular with Russia's war against Ukraine where citizens are literally 'under fire' (see also Ben-Porath 2009) and subject to physical and cultural annihilation. A specific case of citizenship remains however—EU citizenship, which transnationally expands nation-state citizenship by focusing on cross-border mobility and transnational participation rights. Moreover, with the Eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007, the EU has been confronted with the issues of democratisation and the consolidation of democracy, as the majority of the newcomer member states transitioned from non-democratic regimes.

EU citizenship was introduced with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, as it was a further step towards involving citizens more in the European integration project (e.g. Meehan 1993; Wiener 1998). The Union citizenship, as it is formally called, established the free movement of persons across EU internal borders and territorially extended political rights (e.g. the European Parliament elections). With more recent EU treaties, like the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, new participation rights, such as the European Citizens' Initiative, were established. Still, cross-border mobility rights

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represent the core of EU citizenship. They can generate a vast potential for citizens in ECE but also become a further source of inequality concerning the peripheral areas.

The latter is the more relevant, as the key conceptual issue with citizenship remains *the equality of status*. By definition, all citizens are supposed to have equal access to their rights despite socio-economic, territorial, educational and cultural differences. The question remains, however, whether some groups of citizens, for instance, young people and the inhabitants of peripheral areas, might be subject to structural exclusion from their rights—not necessarily in a formal but rather in a practical sense—and whether EU citizenship can mitigate or worsen this problem.

*Firstly*, the chapter sketches some key issues of citizenship research, including EU citizenship. It also problematises them concerning the peripheral areas and young citizens. *Secondly*, it formulates three recommendations for research on citizenship, specifically EU citizenship, with regard to peripheral or rural areas in East Central Europe (ECE). The recommendations focus on (1) the difference between urban and rural citizenship, (2) direct social rights and (3) the EU citizenship as a nested and enacted citizenship.

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## 2 Key Issues of Citizenship Research

There are several key issues citizenship studies have been dealing with for a long time. Among others, these include (1) the citizenship-democracy nexus, (2) the responsibilities of citizenship and (3) technological advancement and its impact on citizenship. I will briefly sketch these issues, also with reference to EU citizenship, as they inform the upcoming recommendations for citizenship research.

### 2.1 Citizenship-Democracy Nexus

Citizenship and democracy can be viewed as ‘twin concepts’, as they belong to the same semantic realm of political self-determination, participation and belonging (see Zilla 2022). There is no democracy without citizenship, nor is there proper citizenship without democracy. In this sense, citizenship means more than having the formal citizenship of a specific country—expressed formally by a national passport. Attacks on democracy, democratic breakdowns or democratic backsliding go hand in hand with pressure on citizenship rights, and assaults on civic freedoms are, for that matter, assaults on citizenship. Even more, citizenship in non-democratic regimes ceases to be proper citizenship, which we can presently see, for instance, in Iran where the government has been attacking, torturing and killing protesting citizens, in particular young people. It remains ‘citizenship’ only in name, since authoritarian and totalitarian regimes use it as a tool of domination and repressive rule (Kochenov 2019), and for that reason, citizenship becomes the very opposite of what it means.

In Hannah Arendt's famous account (see p. 296 in Arendt 1967), citizenship means 'the right to have rights', that is, the right of citizens to determine *themselves* the kind and the degree of rights they want to enjoy in a political community. In this sense, citizenship implies meaningful participation opportunities and a real impact on the political decision making through democratic practices and institutions. In some ECE countries, such as Hungary and Poland, the issue of democratic backsliding is pertinent, which also has an impact on EU citizenship, as citizens of both countries are also EU citizens. In the EU, democracy and the rule of law acquired an essential role with the Copenhagen criteria of 1993 as a precondition for EU membership. Practically, the screening of the democratisation progress in the new member states by the European Commission implies that democracy—which was not originally part of the 1957 Treaty of Rome—became integral to EU citizenship.

In most cases, (nation-)states are viewed as guarantors of citizenship, as they are supposed to mitigate the asymmetries of citizenship, for instance, by equalising rural areas with the urban centres to guarantee the equal status of citizenship. In other words, citizenship has to be 'equalised' via the polity, as equal status does not exist by default. Against this backdrop, statelessness is sometimes viewed as a nightmare of citizenship, as it is a serious threat to civil rights and even human rights, which is one of the key topics in Hannah Arendt's work (e. g. Arendt 1945; also Bernstein 2005). But what happens when the state is the actor violating citizenship by, for instance, attacking democratic institutions? Can the EU help solve this problem?

## 2.2 The Responsibilities of Citizenship

There is no citizenship of an isolated 'unencumbered self', as it is the membership in a political community that renders individuals into citizens. In some accounts, citizenship is mainly related to rights, as these are the main mechanism of community 'production'. In his seminal work, Marshall (1950) argued that citizenship is subject to a historical process of expansion to include different types of rights (civil, political and social) to an ever-larger number of societal groups. Only with all three types of rights, citizenship is fully fledged. Social rights follow civil and political ones as a pinnacle of an evolving citizenship in a modern state, and to some scholars, they represent the very test of mature citizenship still today. Recently, researchers have pointed to social rights being endangered by the liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation of public space, and they interpret these as an erosion of citizenship (cf. Woods 2006; also Fourcade 2021). In the EU, social citizenship relates mainly to the mutual recognition and harmonisation of (some) social rights of the member states, based on the non-discrimination principle *vis-à-vis* EU citizens. For instance, EU citizens maintain health insurance in any EU member state by the virtue of being insured in their state of origin—but only temporary, for the time of their stay. Also, for that reason (if not only for that), some scholars (e.g. Preuss and Everson 1996) considered EU citizenship incomplete and rather an appendix to national citizenships and therefore epiphenomenal. Recent studies suggest that even this modest

non-discrimination-based access to social rights has been subject to retrenchment by the member states (Barbulescu and Favell 2020).

However, citizenship includes also duties connecting individual citizens to their political community—the duties of the community vis-à-vis the citizens and the duties of citizens towards each other. The political community, in its institutionalised form as a government, upholds obligations vis-à-vis the citizens. The ancient Roman citizens—to some students of citizenship still an ideal of citizenship—were fully protected even outside the boundaries of the Roman state: An attack on any Roman citizen meant retaliation by the Roman state. This idea of protection also applies to modern nation-states, as the passport is not only a token of belonging to a particular state, but it also indicates the obligation to support its citizens, should something unfortunate happen to them. The *obligation to protect* belongs thus to the core of citizenship as a duty of the polity vis-à-vis the citizens. This is also a relevant aspect of EU citizenship, as the EU has the obligation to protect EU citizens abroad. When in need, EU citizens can seek the protection of any EU member state embassy should they be unable to contact the embassy of their member state.

Simultaneously, responsibilities among citizens are discussed as being the necessary elements of citizenship (Banting and Kymlicka 2017; Jelin 2019). These are not given attributes or the dispositions of citizens, since they need to be put into action, reiterated and reconstructed through mutual obligations. In an even stronger version, the citizen is primarily a ‘holder of duties’ vis-à-vis the political community, as, for instance, the holding of a political office is regarded as a necessary and welcome burden of responsibility. This Aristotelian perspective of citizenship is quite rare nowadays, as it is deemed unfeasible in the modern work-orientated society. Still, in this view, belonging to a community comes with the normative expectations of how the citizens are supposed to act within a (often territorially bounded) community, in being responsible for other citizens. Citizens are not just random individuals or strangers that only happen to live on the same territory. They have particular duties to each other, as citizenship is not coincidental but based on a coherent collective construction within and social closure to the outside. Here, the question of the equality of status is central, as differences between, for instance, rural and urban areas might have an impact on citizenship. The question arises in how far the political community has the responsibility to take care of citizens with less access to civic resources, such as culture, and the civic infrastructure, such as public administration, parliaments and NGOs. In turn, the lack of obligations in EU citizenship on the part of the citizens has been regarded as problematic (e.g. Bellamy 2015), as it only represents a ‘thin’ form of citizenship without civic obligations.

### 2.3 Technological Advancement and Citizenship

In the last 20 years, technological advancement in the digital realm has been changing the spatial dimension of citizenship. New digital forms of citizenship have developed and shifted citizens’ activity more into social media and also have

allowed for the digital forms of participation and political activity in cyberspace (Isin and Ruppert 2020). As governmental institutions become increasingly reliant on digital solutions and offer digital services, citizens are also more involved in digital citizenship. This applies particularly to the technologically savvy young people whose lives have become digitally imprinted to a much higher degree than was the case 20 years ago. Against this background, labels such as ‘e-government’ and ‘digital era governance’ made their way into the discourse on citizenship. More radical approaches to digital citizenship believe in the vast potential of digital citizenship, particularly when it comes to circumventing the citizenship of the nation-state.

A more recent account of ‘stateless citizenship’—quite the opposite of the Arendtian approach—is closely connected to new financial technologies, cryptocurrencies generating ‘crypto-nomads’ seeking to get rid of the state, mainly due to tax avoidance, but interpreted as a new form of freedom based on radical individualism (Lipton and Livni 2021). However, stateless citizenship appears to be a contradiction in terms, as it is mainly about avoiding the obligations of citizenship. It follows anarchistic fantasies which often assume the forms of crypto-libertarianism, combined with a belief in the freedom of the markets and civil liberties without the presence of the state. Here, the difference between the rural and urban areas is irrelevant, since digital citizenship happens in cyberspace. The only thing that seems to matter to digital stateless citizens is the processing power of the computer servers and access to a broadband internet. In contrast, critical positions highlight the demise of citizenship in cyberspace, mostly due to polarisation, disinformation and ideological bubbles in the social media (Habermas 2022). However, digital citizenship can also mitigate the problems of having a limited access to citizenship in peripheral areas and empower young people living there, provided there are necessary investments into the digital infrastructure. In particular, in large-scale polities like the EU where distances between citizens and the centres of power are long, the digital instruments of citizenship could promote participation and a feeling of belonging.

Against this backdrop, EU citizenship seems to offer several opportunities that could mitigate the vicissitudes of citizenship when it comes to the young people in the peripheral areas of ECE. The EU expands national citizenship and restructures it within a new polity. With this, the Union citizenship is a case of a transnational citizenship (e.g. Kleger 1997), which is contingent on national citizenships, but still has the potential for further development. Its value as a ‘nomadic citizenship’ has been stressed, since European citizenship is framed as a progressive (and also progressing) project (e.g. Braidotti 2019), perhaps even with a potential to ‘equalise’ citizenship across various age groups and urban and peripheral areas, including the rural ones. Still, there are challenges to EU citizenship, which need to be addressed and systematically explored by research. One of the major issues is that the right to mobility, which is presently the centrepiece of EU citizenship, can become a double-edged sword. It gives transnational rights to EU citizens, but it also stimulates them to leave peripheral areas and move to more attractive (urban) places in the EU, thus furthering the depopulation of peripheral areas and an inequality of status. This

raises the question of whether mobility rights can still be justified as a central aspect of EU citizenship and should the equality of status be taken seriously.

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### 3 Recommendations

#### **Recommendation 1: More conceptual research is needed on urban versus rural citizenship in ECE**

Citizens are supposed to enjoy the same set of rights despite belonging to different classes and having different socio-economic statuses, education or places of living, the latter mainly concerning urban versus rural areas. This equality of status is underpinned by a ‘sense of community’ that binds the citizens together, ‘glues’ them socially and generates civic resources such as mutual solidarity. However, the political reality in ECE countries (and in other regions for that matter) might be different when it comes to urban and rural areas. This is, however, not only an empirical issue but a conceptual problem of citizenship research. Already ancient Greek citizenship was closely connected with the city-state, in which rural areas were not necessarily at the political centre. Only in the polis or rather in the city centre thereof, ‘proper citizens’ decided upon their fate, as they practised political self-autonomy (Weber 1999/1921). This *urban citizenship* still inspires the bulk of political theorists today. French classical sociology is largely city- and urbanity-orientated, which affects today’s discourse considerably, with Jacques le Goff’s ‘love for the cities’ (Le Goff 1997) as one of the most visible positions thereof. Also, the present Anglo-Saxon understanding of citizenship is strongly tilted towards the city. For instance, for Benjamin Barber—who is a proponent of ‘strong democracy’—citizenship is practised mainly in cosmopolitan cities nowadays, rather than nation-states, as the cities become interconnected into ‘webs of culture, commerce, and communication that encircle the globe’ creating a sort of cosmopolis. To Barber, the ‘urban dwellers’ are the proper citizens of the twenty-first century, as they are involved in the “miracle of civic ‘glocality’ promising pragmatism instead of politics, innovation rather than ideology, and solutions in place of sovereignty” (see p. 31 in Barber 2013).

This does not leave much space for the citizens of peripheral areas, unless they want to move to the cities. In rural areas, in particular, young people might be excluded from the privileges of citizenship, as they have limited access to higher education, labour opportunities and culture and for that reason might be viewed as lesser citizens. As a result, rural areas might be ‘places that do not matter’ where economic decay and a lack of opportunities render them also places with ‘no future’ (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Access to citizenship requires certain skills, in particular educational and language skills, without which participation in the public sphere, deliberation and communication are impossible or at least strongly limited. This holds even more true for EU citizenship, which requires more than a basic command of the working languages of the EU: English or French. However, access to effective linguistic education, necessary for EU citizenship, cannot be taken for granted in

many peripheral areas. This is certainly not only the case in ECE but also in some old member states (see Lorenz in this volume). Nonetheless, more research is needed on the role of language and EU citizenship. Critical studies point to a one-dimensional diversity in the EU language policy and its problematic consequences for EU citizenship (Kraus 2008).

The EU institutions seem to be aware of the asymmetry between urban and rural areas, as they advanced several programmes and studies, such as the EU rural development policy or ‘A long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas’. Nonetheless, the public visibility of EU citizenship is tilted towards ‘urban citizenship’, as is the case with the European Capitals of Culture programme favouring certain cities (Sassatelli 2009; Schneider and Jacobsen 2019). Research on citizenship would have to deal with the question of whether the EU needs a more specific rural citizenship policy, directly targeting issues connected to young people in rural areas beyond the promotion of transnational mobility rights, which might lead to the depopulation of rural areas. There are studies on rural governance from the UK (Parker 1996) or the Netherlands (de Haan et al. 2019), such as on governing rural communities, which could deliver some ideas concerning citizens’ initiatives in the rural areas of ECE and which could foster the empowerment of citizens there. The questions of asymmetries and unequal access are central for a general conceptual discourse on citizenship but also for EU citizenship research. This could also mean that the EU is confronted with a dual structure of citizenship in the member states: the urban ‘civic miracle’ and rural ‘places that do not matter’. Exploring this issue, both conceptually and empirically, should become the key tenet of future research on EU citizenship.

**Recommendation 2: More research is needed on the role of the EU in strengthening direct social rights in the rural areas of ECE**

Research on peripheral areas, in particular in ECE, is ambivalent regarding the distinction between urban and rural citizenship. Some scholars point to the different practices of citizenship in rural areas: starting from significant differences in the standard of living between urban and rural areas to the access to certain services and infrastructures, including welfare rights (Yarwood 2017). Citizenship research argues that the practices of citizenship are heavily dependent on citizens’ infrastructures such as services, employment and transport to achieve full citizenship rights. As a consequence, poor, disabled or young people might become trapped by rural localities, prohibiting them from achieving their full citizenship (Cresswell 2009). For that reason, rural areas might promote ‘semi-citizenship’, rather than a fully fledged one. In this regard, research on citizenship needs to pay more attention to how EU citizenship can contribute to mitigating the problems of rural citizenship and its asymmetries. One could argue that the EU promotes rural citizenship mainly through direct payments to rural households within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). However, these payments also produce asymmetries and for that reason promote the problem of an unequal access and semi-citizenship. For instance, the majority of farmers in Poland or Romania are smallholders who enjoy only limited EU support through the CAP, due to the modest size of their farming land. The other

inhabitants of rural areas are often people who lost their job in industry. Only 10% of citizens living in rural areas are involved in agriculture for a living (Wilkin and Halasiewicz 2022; see also p. 252 f. in Dachin 2022). As a result, only large-scale farms are subject to proper support by the CAP, and for the rest of the citizens in rural areas, the EU has only very limited visibility and relevance.

Against this background, EU citizenship research should pay more attention to social rights, with which the EU could strengthen rural citizenship. Social rights are not only limited in the EU citizenship but are based mainly on mutual recognition (e.g. concerning pension schemes or a temporary EU health insurance card) across the member states. This might reflect the nature of the EU as a ‘regulatory state’ (Majone 1996), since the EU is not a traditional polity with larger redistribution competences and a larger budget. Still, social and welfare rights appear to be central concerns among young people. In the group discussions with students in peripheral areas, reported in the first part of this volume, social aspects, like a health insurance card, access to clean drinking water and the provision of security by the EU, received utmost attention and were more popular than other rights related to the EU.

Against this background, EU citizenship research should pay more attention to direct social rights by the EU. This is not only because Marshall’s theory focuses on social rights as the final stage of citizenship development. It also follows the argument of Neil Fligstein (2009) that the EU needs to provide—or at least facilitate—benefits to the citizens that have profited less from the EU project so far, in particular, if the goal is to achieve a meaningful feeling of citizenship. The EU project tends, however, to privilege some groups of people: managers, professionals and white-collar workers, who profit from the single market and the mobility opportunities of the EU. They come from urban areas and are, more often than not, well educated. More research needs to be done into EU social measures that can promote a more equality of status among citizens and thus mitigate problems of semi-citizenship. This could include even more investments into the Erasmus exchange programme for school students—rather than only university students—combined with a system of stipends favouring rural areas and support for people deciding to return to the ‘periphery’ with their newly acquired educational resources. This is closely related to the question of how transnational mobility affects EU citizenship by promoting asymmetrical push and pull effects (see also Lorenz and Anders in this volume). Thus, research should deal more systematically with the structural incentives of the EU citizenship, as, for instance, young people in the peripheral areas of ECE can be structurally stimulated—by the very nature of EU citizenship—to leave, rather than stay, thus negatively impacting rural citizenship. Already in 2001, Philippe C. Schmitter and Michael W. Bauer argued in favour of a direct expansion of social citizenship in the European Union by establishing a Euro scholarship, which would alleviate the social exclusion in the peripheral regions of the EU and would be a case of direct social redistribution by the EU, rather than social regulation. In this way, EU citizenship in rural areas could become more symmetrical as opposed to the limited group-orientated direct payments to the farmers. Schmitter and Bauer made their (modest as they call it) proposal specifically

concerning the ECE countries in the wake of an Eastern enlargement, as they envisaged a growing inequality between the West and East. Presently, the asymmetries in ECE are not only between the West and East (as the socio-economic distance has on average diminished) but also between the prosperous urban centres and the underprivileged periphery in ECE—an issue that needs to be further explored.

### **Recommendation 3: More research on EU citizenship as a nested and enacted citizenship**

EU citizenship can be viewed as a nested citizenship (Faist 2001), which combines several levels of the EU multilevel governance. In the multilevel polity of the EU, citizenship is dispersed across various levels: the municipal, the national and the European. In this sense, civil, social and political rights can be attached to the different levels of the EU polity, rather than be evenly integrated within one political space of the EU. This integration means that in a nested citizenship there is a dependence of the levels on each other. Not only the European level of citizenship depends on the national one, but also, for instance, the local one depends on the European one. Should the local level espouse citizenship challenges, the EU level would also be responsible for mitigating them. This follows from the claim that the EU is a union of both member states and citizens. This double structure of EU legitimacy implies that the EU institutions have the obligation to protect all EU citizens, not just those abroad and outside of the EU. Partially, this obligation is noticeable in the EU's responsibility to enhance the living standards of the poorer regions of the EU and to invest in the infrastructure therein (mainly through the European Structural and Investment Funds). This reflects the aforementioned idea of 'semi-citizenship' which needs the 'prosthetics' of citizenship, that is, the infrastructure, access and education, to become a fully fledged citizenship.

However, EU citizenship research has largely ignored the more political challenges to a nested citizenship. Under the conditions of democratic backsliding, rural areas might also contribute to the limiting of civic rights. Rural areas establish more social control due to their smaller spaces, as people more often know each other personally. At the same time, rural areas in ECE tend to be more conservative, and by the same token they might establish more social barriers to some forms of protest. For instance, reports on women's protests against the abortion law in small towns and villages in Poland confirm exactly this. In rural areas, it is more difficult to mobilise citizens' protests, as social pressure from the local community and the Catholic Church is higher and more palpable (Wernio 2020). This suggests not only that, in rural areas, access to the social and educational infrastructure of citizenship might be limited but also to the exercise of basic political rights. This raises the question of the EU's responsibility towards these developments, or in other words the obligation to protect the EU citizens, whenever their rights are under pressure. Research on EU citizenship would need to deal with this issue more thoroughly.

A possibility (even if a modest one) would be to carry out more systematic research on connecting rural areas more strongly with democratic innovations that



have been practised in urban areas, such as participatory budgeting, and enlarging the repertoires of citizenship. Participatory budgeting has been already practised in the rural areas of ECE, but, as often, it has suffered from underfunding (Leśniewska-Napierała 2019). This might be a chance for the EU to step in and get involved in promoting participatory budgeting, both financially and educationally. EU citizenship research should reflect on the potential of democratic innovations in dealing with democratic backsliding. Certainly, participatory budgeting is not a direct solution to violations of civic rights, but it could shift EU citizenship research into more concrete measures on how to deal with democratic backsliding in the peripheral areas of ECE, rather than reflect abstractly on the nature of the EU polity and democracy (or *demosi-cracy*).

Moreover, EU citizenship research should pay more attention to how young people in rural areas can learn and use democratic innovations practised at the EU level, including the European Citizens' Initiative, online consultations or initiatives like the Conference on the Future of Europe. These modes of participation are relatively well studied. However, as the studies show (e.g. Kohler-Koch, 2011; Kies and Nanz 2013; Røed and Hansen 2018; Nahr 2018; Alander and von Ondarza 2020), these innovations tend to remain the citizenship practices of larger urban areas among well-educated citizens. An increased number of democratic innovations do not necessarily translate per se into a more societally even and regionally broader participation. This could change if more sortition-based instruments were to be used involving or even favouring rural areas.

In this context, EU citizenship could be viewed as an 'enacted citizenship' (Isin and Saward 2013), which promotes democratic innovations and participation opportunities and supports the citizens' initiatives in rural areas, especially among technologically savvy young people. The term 'enacted citizenship' attaches much more value to the political acts of citizens than to their status. In this sense, citizenship is based on performative acts and claims, in which EU citizens contribute to the creation of what becomes citizenship. However, 'enacted citizenship' could also be thought of as citizenship, in which the EU makes the rights of citizenship salient and empowers citizens. This would extend the original meaning of an 'enacted citizenship' by introducing the activity of the EU to stimulate more active citizenship, in particular in the rural areas of ECE, where EU citizenship has a low salience. The digital tools of citizenship could play a relevant role in this context (see the chapters of Lorenz and Stein and Pentzold in this volume). While the EU invests in the digital infrastructure in poorer regions, it could also promote digital citizenship competencies, including language skills. While digital tools offer great potential for online participation, scholars highlight that digital citizenship, despite its new potential, produces further inequality among the educated and less educated citizens. Mossberger (2008) argues, for instance, that educational competencies are decisive for digital citizenship, in particular for political participation online. Hence, more research is needed into how digital tools may be both a source of empowerment and create further asymmetries in rural areas.

## 4 Conclusions

One of the major aspects of EU citizenship is that it is a case of transnational citizenship with moving boundaries, rather than traditional nation-state-based citizenship, associated with modern statehood. As a consequence, EU citizenship should not be framed as a territorially extended version of a national citizenship but a rather novel institution. In this view, EU citizenship belongs to a realm of institutionally framed interactions, rather than to nationally or ethnically bounded communities. As for citizenship in the EU, it was not a nation-state but the European Court of Justice (ECJ) which has played an essential role. The ECJ was decisive in the process of cementing and extending the rights of EU citizenship by developing a non-discrimination policy on the grounds of nationality, age or gender in legal cases.

Still, central aspects of traditionally understood citizenship, such as citizens' rights and responsibilities, are valid and essential for EU citizenship. This is especially relevant for young people in the rural areas of ECE and the citizenship research that deals with it. The recommendations for EU citizenship research are based on several expectations, which also point to further research. Firstly, there might be a difference between urban and rural citizenships, which needs to be studied more systematically, also in the context of the EU. Should EU citizenship be framed as an 'urban citizenship' or be based on the interests of the urban population, it can have negative consequences for rural areas and violate the equality of status standard. The right to mobility within the EU, a centrepiece of EU citizenship, could strengthen this asymmetry even more. It gives transnational mobility rights to EU citizens, but it also stimulates them to leave rural areas and move to urban places in the EU, thus challenging the equality of status between urban and rural areas even further. Research should explore these two faces of EU citizenship, as there might be a 'dual' EU citizenship with an asymmetrical status. Secondly, the research should pay more attention to direct social rights within the EU, in particular concerning young people in rural areas. There are certainly budgetary limitations, given the modest size of the EU budget, but this issue has been neglected for years and would deserve more research. This is closely associated with studies on belonging to the EU and European identity, which had their hype in 2002–2010, but lost their impetus with the multiple EU crises and growing Euroscepticism. Nevertheless, citizenship also relates to questions of identity, membership and belonging where social rights are likely to play a central role. Thus, research on citizenship should revisit these concepts in the context of direct social rights in the EU. Thirdly, EU citizenship is a nested citizenship which implies the obligations of the EU vis-à-vis rural areas. This is especially the case, when democratic backsliding in EU member states occurs, as citizenship and democracy are intertwined. The EU could enact citizenship by promoting democratic innovations, citizens' initiatives and governance in rural communities. This also applies to digital citizenship at the EU level, as digital space can generate opportunities for participation but can also produce and reproduce inequality. Thus, citizenship studies need to focus more systematically on cases where the equality of status is challenged.

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