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Barriers to youth civic participation in physical civic spaces:

**First comparative findings from Romania,
Italy, France and Belgium**



Why this research matters



Youth civic participation is often discussed, but mostly through two lenses:

- formal participation: voting, consultations, institutional mechanisms
- digital participation: petitions, social media, online activism

What remains less visible is what happens in **physical civic spaces**:

- where young people meet
- where they exchange views
- where they organise
- where they build trust
- where participation becomes a lived, place-based experience

An additional gap concerns **inequality**:

- who is excluded
- from which spaces
- under what conditions
- through which barriers

Why this research matters



Key contextual evidence

Only **31% of vulnerable youth feel their voice matters** in democratic processes, compared to 58% of non-marginalised youth (European Youth Barometer, 2023).

This gap is especially visible among:

- youth with disabilities
- LGBTQIA+ youth
- youth with migrant backgrounds
- youth in rural, peripheral or underserved areas

The problem is not simply whether young people participate, but whether they are equally enabled to participate.

Why this research within the EVY-PACT project?



EVY-PACT responds to a set of interconnected democratic inequalities affecting vulnerable youth.

The project starts from the idea that exclusion from participation is not only political. It is also:

- spatial
- institutional
- educational
- informational
- relational

The main gaps addressed by the project

- Citizenship awareness gap: only 27% of vulnerable youth know their EU rights, compared to 61% of non-marginalised youth (EU Democracy Action Plan Mid-term Review, 2023)
- Capability gap: many young people express interest in engagement, but far fewer feel equipped to act
- Spatial gap: lack of accessible physical civic spaces is one of the most significant participation barriers
- Trust gap: institutions are often perceived as distant and unresponsive

Our research approach



Our approach builds a comparative evidence base on youth participation by focusing on physical civic spaces and the real-life barriers faced by vulnerable groups across partner countries.

We combine national desk research with field research in selected communities.

This allows us to move from policy frameworks to lived experiences, from formal participation opportunities to actual access, from abstract rights to real participation conditions.

Focus groups in the research

- youth with disabilities
- LGBTQIA+ youth
- youth with migrant backgrounds

How we analyse participation

- institutional
- non-institutional
- hybrid (online-offline)

We also analyse

- barriers in physical spaces,
- territorial disparities,
- the gap between formal participation and real, meaningful participation.

Where we look



The research is carried out comparatively in Romania, Italy, Belgium and France, with reference to EU-level data and frameworks.

These contexts reflect different participation patterns:

- Italy highlights informal and place-based participation, with uneven institutional recognition
- Romania shows stronger structural and territorial inequalities
- France shows relatively high engagement, but increasingly digital and socio-economically differentiated

The comparison allows us to identify both common European trends and country-specific barriers.

Research process: current stage and next steps

- desk research, including policy analysis, data review and mapping of barriers and evidence gaps
- field research in 12 communities across the partner countries, focusing on urban peripheries, rural areas and underserved spaces where participation gaps are more likely to occur.

=> national reports, field research findings, a transnational report and dissemination through a public event and stakeholder dialogue.

Youth participation in the EU: the broader picture

EU-level data shows that youth participation is real, but not universal and not equally distributed.

Key figures

- 48% of young people took action to change society (petitions, rallies, contacting politicians) (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024)
- 64% participated in the activities of at least one organisation (sports clubs, youth organisations, volunteering, etc.) (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024)

Youth engagement in the EU is significant, but a large share of young people still remains outside organised participation.

How young people understand effective participation

According to EU data, the most effective actions for making young people's voice heard are perceived to be (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024):

- Voting 38%
- Social media engagement 32%
- Participation in student or youth organisations 26%
- Public consultations 25%
- Political movements, parties or unions 25%

=> participation is increasingly hybrid: partly institutional, digital, organisational, issue-based.

EU participation patterns, barriers and expectations

The most frequently cited barriers are (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024):

- Lack of time 40%
- Lack of interest 26%
- Nobody asked or invited me 16%
- Lack of knowledge 11%
- Financial barriers 9%

What young people engage in and expect (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024):

- Youth engagement is driven by values such as human rights (34%), climate action (33%), equal rights (29%) and well-being (29%)
- At the same time, young people expect the EU to ensure peace and security (37%), reduce inequalities (34%) and uphold democratic values (30%).
- 67% say EU actions affect their daily life.

Participation at EU level is real but uneven, hybrid and often outside formal politics. It is strongly value-driven, yet constrained by access, invitation, awareness and time.

How participation differs across countries



Across the partner countries, participation exists, but in different forms:

- Romania shows structurally constrained participation
- Italy reflects spatial and informal participation
- France shows higher but increasingly digital participation

Participation levels: similar engagement, different accessibility

Around 48% of youth take action to influence society at the EU level (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024).

However, national realities differ:

- Italy shows high engagement, with 64% participating in organisations and 48% taking action (Eurobarometer, 2024)
- France shows stable engagement, with around 28-30% volunteering and strong online participation (INJEP, 2025)
- Romania shows lower sustained engagement, with around 12% NGO membership (BOSC, 2025)

How participation differs across countries



All these countries have:

- participation frameworks
- consultation mechanisms
- youth policies

However, access and relevance remain limited

- In Romania, participation is often procedural and symbolic (low attendance in consultations, limited feedback) (OECD, 2023)
- In Italy, participation is often informal and unrecognised (self-organised spaces, everyday participation) (Partispace, 2018)
- In France, participation exists but outside institutions (low electoral engagement, high protest/digital engagement) (FAGE, 2025)

Physical civic spaces: a shared structural barrier

Access to physical civic spaces is a major barrier across all countries

- EU-level evidence: 67% of marginalised youth identify a lack of physical spaces as a key barrier (European Youth Forum, 2023)
- In Italy, only 23% municipalities have youth civic spaces; 12% rural; 8% accessible (ISTAT, 2022)
- In Romania, only 19% rural youth have access to civic spaces; 79% never participated in CSO activities (ANPCDEFP, 2023)
- In France, 78% youth in priority neighbourhoods lack civic spaces vs 43% in affluent areas (ONPV, 2022)

Territorial inequalities

Italy

spatial inequalities linked to (Golio, 2025):

- urban transformation
- gentrification
- uneven distribution of civic spaces

Romania

- strong urban-rural division
- participation concentrated in cities
- lack of infrastructure in rural areas

France

- less territorial gap overall
- strong inequalities in priority neighbourhoods vs affluent areas (ONPV, 2022)

Socio-economic inequalities



Participation is strongly shaped by socio-economic position

France (strongest effect)

- higher engagement among:
 - employed youth
 - higher educated youth
- lower engagement among:
 - unemployed, low-income youth (INJEP, 2025)

Romania

- participation limited by:
 - poverty
 - unemployment
 - high NEETs rates (OECD, 2026)

Italy

- economic precarity shapes:
 - how and where young people participate
 - shift toward flexible, adaptive engagement

Digital vs physical participation



France

- strong digital engagement:
 - 41% online participation (petitions, causes) (INJEP, 2025; Labo Société Numérique, 2025)
- risk: disconnection from physical spaces

Romania

- lower overall participation
- limited access to both:
 - physical spaces
 - structured opportunities

Italy

- hybrid participation:
 - physical + informal + creative spaces
 - strong role of everyday environments (Partispace, 2018)

Trust and relationship with institutions



A shared challenge: weak connection between youth and institutions

France

- high distrust:
 - 78% distrust political parties (FAGE, 2025)
- strong engagement, but outside institutions

Romania

- low trust
- participation seen as ineffective
- weak engagement in formal mechanisms (OECD, 2023)

Italy

- tension between:
 - autonomy of youth initiatives
 - institutional recognition (Partispace, 2018)

Layered barriers for vulnerable youth



Barriers are cumulative rather than isolated. Across all countries, similar groups face consistent challenges: youth with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth, youth with migrant backgrounds

Cross-country patterns

- Youth with disabilities face physical inaccessibility and a lack of adapted formats
- LGBTQIA+ youth experience safety concerns and discrimination
- Youth with migrant backgrounds encounter language barriers, limited access to information and lower levels of trust

EU-level evidence

- 53% lower understanding of EU rights among migrant youth (Migration Policy Group, 2023)
- Only 34% of youth with disabilities understand their rights (Eurobarometer / EDF, 2023)

Country examples

- Italy: migrant youth face unequal education outcomes and integration barriers (Save the Children, 2025)
- Romania: structural disadvantages include high NEETs rates, low employment and rural exclusion (OECD, 2026)
- France: participation is closely linked to well-being and socio-economic stability (INJEP, 2025)

The participation gap



There is a gap between formal participation opportunities and real, meaningful participation

How it looks in each country

- In Romania, participation exists but is rarely meaningful, and while we know who is excluded, there is a limited understanding of how exclusion works spatially
- In Italy, participation exists but is often not recognised, and although it is frequently informal and spatial, unequal access across local contexts remains underexplored
- In France, participation exists but is weakly institutionalised, and current knowledge focuses more on attitudes than on place-based participation

Key research gaps

- Lack of disaggregated data on vulnerable youth
- Limited evidence on the accessibility of physical civic spaces
- Weak local-level data
- Limited evidence on safety and inclusion in civic environments
- Underrepresentation of marginalised youth in existing research
- Limited knowledge of how exclusion operates in real spaces

Why physical civic spaces matter for democracy

Physical civic spaces matter because they are not just venues for activities. They are:

- infrastructures of participation
- spaces of co-presence
- environments of trust-building
- places where community is produced

Physical spaces can shape:

- who can enter
- who feels safe
- who is visible
- who belongs
- who is able to speak

This research also matters beyond national contexts because:

- civic space across Europe is increasingly under pressure
- participation is often formally promoted but unevenly enabled
- local civic infrastructures remain underdeveloped

The added value of this research is that it recentres democracy around the real places where participation is lived, blocked or made possible.

Next steps



Based on these first insights, the project will move to field research in 12 communities across Romania, Italy, Belgium and France.

The aim is to understand:

- how barriers are experienced in practice
- how local contexts shape participation
- what types of civic spaces matter
- what kinds of support are needed to make participation more inclusive

The findings will then inform:

- inclusive educational activities
- meaningful participation opportunities
- dialogue with institutions at local, national and EU levels



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THANK YOU

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