

## The ENGAGE Project - Needs and Preferences on Empowering Next Generation Advocates for Global Education

Irina Gheorghiu<sup>1</sup>, Alina Ailincăi<sup>2</sup>, Andreea Ionel<sup>3</sup>, Diana Mazga<sup>4</sup>, Stefan Colibaba<sup>5</sup>

Albert Ludwigs University Freiburg, Germany<sup>1</sup>  
EuroEd Foundation Iași, Romania<sup>2, 3</sup>  
EuroEd High School Iași, Romania<sup>4</sup>  
Al. I.Cuza University Iași, Romania<sup>5</sup>

### Abstract

*This article presents a study based on the ENGAGE project (Empowering Next Generation Advocates for Global Education), funded by the European Commission through the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (KA220) programme. The project is carried out by an international consortium comprising educational institutions from France, The Czech Republic, Germany, and Romania, all of which have extensive experience in European projects, youth development, human rights, and inclusion. Targeting youth leaders (YLS), the ENGAGE project addresses a key gap by offering an online course and training programs—both at national and international levels—focused on EU values, cultural diversity, inclusion, social justice, and civic engagement. Its central aim is to equip youth leaders with the knowledge, skills, tools, and methodologies necessary to educate young people about democracy and European values, promote inclusive participation, and ensure that all youth—including those with disabilities or at risk—have equitable access to opportunities. The article centres on the project's research, which investigates the needs, preferences, and challenges faced by youth leaders. This process ensures the relevance and impact of the project's outputs in promoting youth participation and civic engagement. The paper presents the main research results, which include the youth leaders' needs questionnaires, the national report that summarizes the results from Romania, a collection of best practices, infographics that show important data, and a strategy document that lays out ways to make educational practices more inclusive. Additionally, it offers insights into the findings from the questionnaires.*

**Keywords:** youth leaders, young people, young people engagement, inclusion

### 1. Introduction

Young people play a significant role in shaping future society. Thence their need for inclusive and meaningful support and guidance. Today's young people, aged 13 to 30, make up a significant portion of Europe's population, totaling 73 million individuals [1]. Among them, 24.5% were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with Romania having the highest percentage at 37.9% and the Czech Republic the lowest at 10.5% [1]. Research indicates that younger generations tend to be less knowledgeable, interested, and engaged in democratic processes, leading to a lack of a sense of belonging to the European Union [2, 3, 4, 5]. Such attitudes may pose critical problems to democracy, especially as Europe faces unprecedented challenges against the growing anti-democratic tendencies and the emergence of alternative extremist forms of participation. Studies indicate that civic participation is linked to experiences of inclusion and exclusion [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12]. Therefore, we must provide constant information and practical contexts in an inclusive and meaningful manner to counteract detachment from the European project. The promotion of democratic awareness and values, as well as engaging youth in decision-making and democratic processes are key priorities of the EU. Meaningful inclusive youth civic participation requires information, authority and voice, power sharing, transparency, accountability, and material and non-material support, emphasizing the need for tailored engagement strategies.

The European ENGAGE project (2024-1-RO01-KA220-YOU-000250540) aims at bridging the existing gaps in youth development. By providing Youth Leaders (YL) with hands-on resources and engaging activities focused on European values, democratic processes, social justice, and inclusion, it equips them to empower young people. The project's emphasis on skills like project management, advocacy, digital literacy, and cultural awareness, coupled with its focus on creating inclusive environments,

ensures young people are prepared for active civic participation, enhanced employability, and successful integration into diverse communities, ultimately fostering positive societal change and addressing critical social challenges [13].

## **2. The ENGAGE Project**

### **2.1 The ENGAGE Project's Objectives**

The ENGAGE project aims to equip youth leaders with the knowledge, skills, methodologies, and tools necessary to educate young people about democratic processes and European values. It seeks to raise awareness of diversity and inclusion across Europe, ensuring equal access to opportunities for all youth, including those with disabilities and at risk.

### **2.2 The Project's Partnership**

The project's partnership consists of non-governmental organisations from France, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Romania, all of which have rich and successful experience in European projects, youth development, human rights, and inclusion. These institutions promote youth development and social and civic engagement, particularly in the areas of active citizenship and civic engagement.

### **2.3 Target Groups**

The project aims to target those directly involved with the youth (youth leaders, youth workers, and educators), those who can further disseminate knowledge (multipliers/facilitators) as well as young people interested in the project's topics and young people with fewer opportunities. The project aims to empower youth leaders/workers in handling sensitive topics within diverse groups, creating a safe and inclusive environment for all. Of special interest are young people aged between 13-30, with fewer opportunities, facing the risk of poverty or social exclusion, from rural areas, having cultural differences, mental health and invisible disabilities or with eco-anxiety and war anxiety, and who intend to take a more active part in society.

### **2.4 The ENGAGE Project's Results**

The ENGAGE project is innovative due to its comprehensive and multi-faceted approach, with research serving as the foundational pillar guiding all activities. This research underpins the development of resources, informs the creation of knowledge and skills, and shapes co-creation processes in international sessions. It also guides the design of practical activities, dialogue, feedback, and awareness-raising efforts. The project ensures that its holistic methodology—combining theoretical, practical, and digital tools—produces transferably effective and impactful outcomes. Key developments include a Strategy Document promoting inclusive practices among educators and youth leaders, based on research involving at least 650 youth workers and young people with fewer opportunities. It also features a Code of Ethical Communication and Inclusion to address challenging situations within youth groups. An online course with 10 modules and 20 practical activities is designed to actively engage youth in inclusive and democratic participation, with 100 youth leaders expected to complete it. A distinctive feature is the "Into Action" sessions—interactive learning activities that connect theory with practice—aimed at translating knowledge into real-world skills and confidence. The project fosters collaboration among youth leaders across Europe in order to address shared social, economic, and environmental challenges with a view to enhancing European cohesion, collective responsibility, and support for inclusive policies.

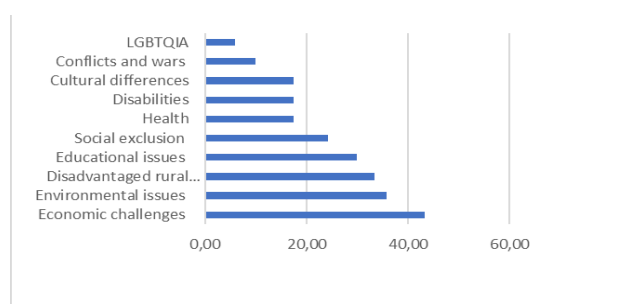
## **3. The ENGAGE Research Findings and their Implications on the ENGAGE Training Course**

The research is based on a questionnaire which was carried out on 120 youth leaders in all partner countries. In Romania most of the youth leaders who answered the questionnaire (67.5% ) came from big towns, most of them with university studies or doing a BA (33.33%), MA (45.84) and even PHD (16.67) in a wide range of fields: arts and humanities (21.67%), life science (5.83%), medicine (7.50%), business/ management (14.17%), social sciences (23.33%), and STEM (27.50%). Regarding their experience, only 25% of interviewees reported having over 10 years' experience of working with

young people in various settings: schools (35.00%), youth centers (17.50%), non-governmental organizations (49.17%), universities (14.17%), the public sector (4.17%), and social services (0.83%). Most of the young people they work with belong to the 18- 24-year-old age group (49.17%), followed by the under-13 age group (35.83%), the 13-14 and 15-17 age groups (34.17%).

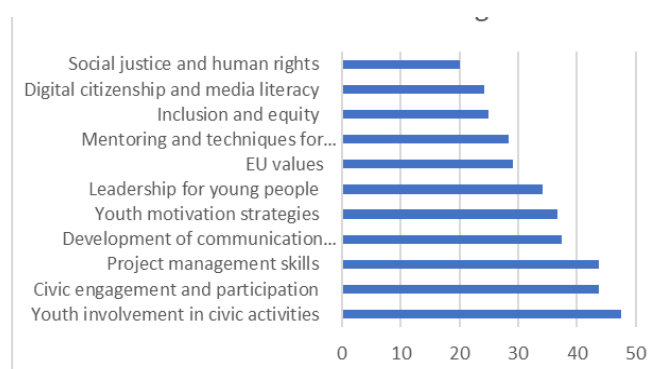
Most of the youth leaders work with young people (Fig.1.) with economic challenges (43.33%), young people focused on environmental issues (35.83%), young people from disadvantaged rural areas (33.33%), having educational issues such as early school leavers, literacy (30.00%), social exclusion based on religious, ethnic discrimination (24.17%), health issues (17.50%), disabilities (17.50%), cultural differences (17.50%), young people from conflict and war zones (10.00%), LGBTQIA (5.83%).

**Fig. 1. Challenges young people face**



The questionnaire reveals that the leaders received formal training (education or recognized certification - Fig.2.) across a range of important areas relevant to their roles. Notably, the highest proportions received education or certification in youth involvement in civic activities (47.50%), civic engagement and participation (45.83%), and project management skills (45.83%). This suggests a strong foundational focus on fostering active citizenship, civic responsibilities, and organizational competencies among leaders. However, the lower percentages in areas such as social justice and human rights (20.00%), inclusion and equity (25.00%), and digital citizenship and media literacy (24.17%) highlight potential gaps in training related to critical contemporary issues.

**Fig. 2. Leaders' formal training**

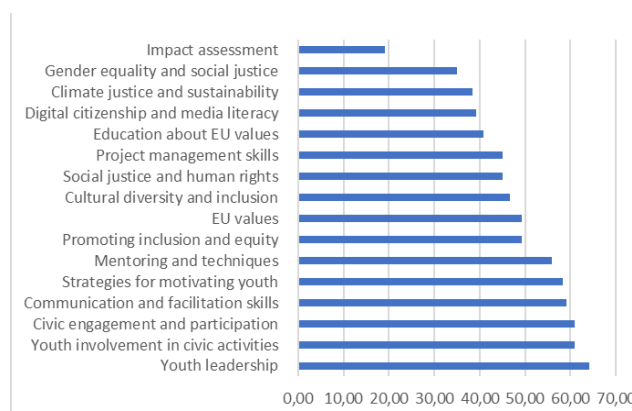


These areas are increasingly vital in today's diverse and digitalized environment, implying a need to strengthen training modules around social justice, inclusion, and digital literacy to ensure leaders are well-equipped to address current challenges.

Overall, while the existing training coverage is promising, there is an opportunity to broaden and deepen the curriculum to encompass a more holistic and inclusive approach. Enhancing training in social justice, equity, and digital skills would better prepare youth leaders to effectively engage diverse youth populations and navigate the digital landscape responsibly.

The survey results also reveal insightful priorities among youth leaders (YL) regarding their perceptions of essential roles and competencies (Fig.3).

**Fig. 3.** Important topics that highlight YL' roles



The emphasis on leadership development (64.17%) underscores the need to focus on building strong, capable youth leaders through targeted training. High priorities on youth involvement in civic activities and engagement (both around 60.83%) highlight the importance of fostering active citizenship and participation. The significant value placed on communication and facilitation skills (59.17%) and motivating youth (58.33%) indicates that the course should incorporate modules on effective engagement, inspiring others, and facilitating dialogue.

Mentoring and empowerment techniques (55.83%) point to integrating strategies that nurture young people's potential and leadership qualities. Additionally, promoting inclusion, equity, and core EU values such as democracy, freedom, and equality (around 49-50%) suggest content that focuses on creating inclusive environments and instilling shared values. Topics like cultural diversity and social justice (around 45%) demonstrate an appreciation for addressing social issues and human rights, which should be incorporated into activities fostering social awareness.

While project management skills (45%) and education on EU values (40.83%) are also relevant, areas like impact assessment (19.17%) may require further emphasis or development within the course. Overall, these findings inform a comprehensive program that balances leadership skills, civic engagement, communication, inclusion, and values-based education, ensuring youth leaders are equipped to inspire, engage, and foster positive change in their communities.

In terms of their confidence to educate young people in the spirit of the above-mentioned topics the answers vary from fully confident (36.67%) to not confident 1.67% - probably, as respondents' answers suggest, due to training based only on experience and not formal training.

As for the critical challenges young people generally face, the findings highlight a comprehensive understanding among youth leaders of the multifaceted challenges faced by young people today. The issues identified—such as lack of (academic, emotional, civic) education, civic engagement deficits, and values erosion—point to gaps in both formal and informal learning environments. These gaps can hinder the development of well-rounded, responsible, and engaged citizens. Digital addiction and the negative impact of online environments on mental health are particularly concerning, underscoring the need for digital literacy and mental health support initiatives. The recognition of misinformation and low motivation reflects awareness of the complex information landscape and the importance of fostering resilience and critical engagement among youth. Challenges related to practical education and employment—such as the mismatch between school curricula and labor market demands, limited attractive professional opportunities, and competition—indicate significant systemic issues in education and employment pathways. These factors contribute to stress, social pressure, and a sense of uncertainty about the future, which can diminish motivation and engagement. Other challenges like attention deficits and lack of critical thinking suggest a need for educational reforms that prioritize skills such as focus, analysis, and independent judgment.

These insights show that youth leaders understand both individual and systemic barriers to youth development. They offer valuable guidance for designing comprehensive interventions that address



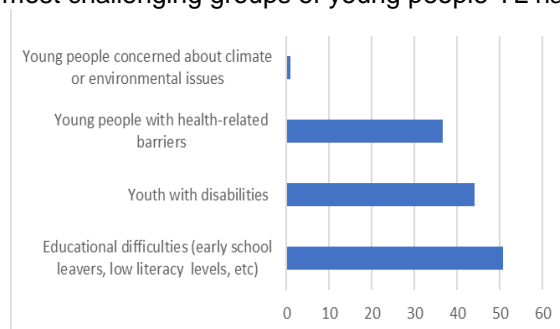
these challenges by combining civic, emotional, and practical education tailored to current societal and labor market realities. The course aims to foster critical thinking, media literacy, and responsible digital citizenship to combat misinformation and digital addiction. Additionally, it sets out to create accessible pathways to employment and entrepreneurship to alleviate stress and social pressure about the future.

The questionnaire highlighted key challenges faced by youth leaders in their local contexts, notably resource limitations and low community support as well as low engagement and participation. To address these, the ENGAGE training course will adopt a holistic, layered approach that effectively integrates both global and local perspectives. This can be achieved by incorporating real-world local examples that demonstrate how these issues directly affect communities, alongside inclusive, engaging activities that resonate with local concerns to foster relevance and urgency. Another step will be to include in the course modules on social justice, diversity, and environmental sustainability illustrated through local case studies and global data. Additionally, by fostering critical reflection and action the training course will encourage youth leaders to consider how global issues influence their community and vice versa, supporting the development of projects that meet local needs with a global perspective. This approach promotes a sense of agency and interconnectedness.

When it comes to the methods or tools to promote the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities, 39 participants answered they did not know or they did not use any. The remaining participants stated that they usually employ various tools and methods to promote the inclusion of young people with limited opportunities. These include service-learning projects, workshops, community activities, and creating dialogue spaces. They collaborate with local organizations to facilitate access to educational resources, funding, and training, often utilizing online platforms to overcome geographical and economic barriers. Volunteering, civic projects, mentorship, and peer-to-peer learning are also key strategies to develop skills, confidence, and social networks. Additionally, they organize afterschool programs, offer scholarships, and provide free educational materials and activities tailored to young people's needs. Partnerships with NGOs, institutions, and local authorities support efforts such as internships, job placements, and resource access. Overall, these initiatives aim to reduce social, economic, and educational barriers, helping young people build better futures through inclusive, supportive, and accessible programmes.

According to youth leaders, the most challenging groups of young people to include in activities (Fig.5.) are those with educational difficulties (e.g., early school dropout, low literacy levels, requiring additional learning support) — 50.83%, youth with disabilities (e.g., physical, intellectual, or sensory impairments) — 44.17%, young people with health-related barriers (e.g., chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, neurodivergence) — 36.67%, and the easiest to include are young people concerned about climate or environmental issues — 0.83%.

**Fig. 5.** The most challenging groups of young people YL have to include

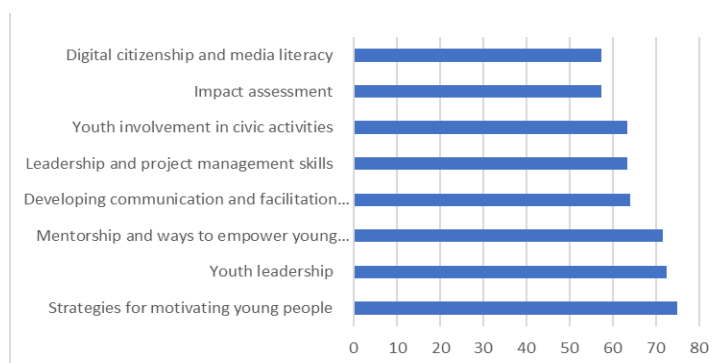


The findings highlight significant inclusivity **challenges faced by youth leaders**, with over half identifying young people with educational difficulties as the most difficult to engage, followed closely by youth with disabilities and health-related barriers. Strikingly, those interested in climate or environmental issues are perceived as the easiest to include, likely due to their motivated and issue-driven nature.

Implications for course content include emphasizing inclusive pedagogy and practices tailored to diverse groups, such as differentiated instruction, accessible communication, and adaptive activities. The course strives to equip youth leaders with practical strategies for creating accessible physical and digital environments, supported by case studies and best practices for supporting learners with disabilities or health challenges. It is important to develop specific approaches for engaging marginalized groups, including building trust, offering flexible participation options, and fostering peer support and personalized engagement. Additionally, components that challenge biases and stereotypes about marginalized youth are to be integrated to promote empathy and equitable inclusion. Leveraging interest in climate and environmental issues can serve as accessible entry points for practicing inclusive methods, using environmental projects as models for adaptable, inclusive activities. Finally, fostering collaboration with support services and experts—such as special educators and health professionals—will enhance inclusivity, and training youth leaders to identify and mobilize relevant resources will further support equitable participation.

The youth leaders' responses provide valuable insights for developing an effective training course tailored to their needs and preferences (Fig.6.). The high interest in strategies for motivating young people (75%), in youth leadership (72.50%), mentorship (71.67%), and communication skills (64.17%) indicates a strong demand for practical leadership development content. Topics like project management (63.33%), civic engagement (63.33%), impact assessment (57.50%), and digital citizenship (57.50%) highlight areas where participants seek skills to enhance their effectiveness. The course should therefore prioritise interactive modules on motivation, leadership, mentorship, communication, civic participation, and digital literacy, integrating both theory and extensive practical exercises.

**Fig. 6.** Youth leaders' favourite training topics



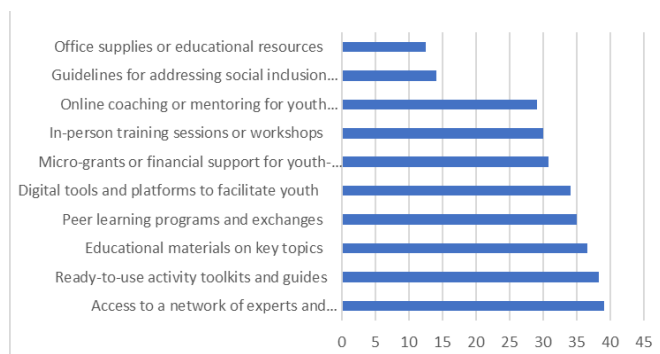
Regarding the preferred formats, the nearly even split among hybrid (53.33%), online (50.83%), and face-to-face (37.50%) formats suggests the need for a flexible, blended approach that accommodates diverse learning preferences. Incorporating online modules, complemented by in-person workshops or sessions, can maximize accessibility and engagement. Volunteer or internship experiences (42.50%) imply a desire for experiential learning opportunities outside traditional sessions.

As for teaching methods, the preference for case studies and group activities (87.50% and 62.50%) underscores the need for participatory, collaborative learning. Personalized mentoring (41.67%) suggests integrating one-on-one support to address individual development needs. The relatively lower preference for traditional lectures (17.50%) indicates that the course should prioritize interactive and experiential learning over purely didactic methods.

The question on how the project can support their activity had varied answers (Fig.7). Access to a network of youth professionals (39.17%) and ready-to-use toolkits (38.33%) are seen as key supports, guiding the inclusion of resource-sharing platforms, mentorship networks, and practical guides. Materials on mental health, sustainability, and EU values (36.67%) should be integrated into the content to foster well-rounded youth development. Additional suggestions like peer learning exchanges (35%) and digital tools (34.17%) suggest opportunities for fostering community and innovation. Financial support mechanisms (30.83%) could be incorporated as part of the training's broader ecosystem, encouraging project funding skills.



**Fig. 7. How the project can support YL activity**



The international networking opportunities offered by the ENGAGE project were appreciated by youth leaders as highly beneficial. The findings underscore the significant value of international networking opportunities for youth leaders. They point out that such engagement can foster long-term collaborations, enhance resource sharing, and facilitate the exchange of innovative ideas and best practices. Furthermore, these opportunities broaden perspectives, expose youth leaders to diverse approaches, and support the development of more effective, inclusive, and impactful local initiatives. Implications for the course content include incorporating modules on international collaboration, focusing on building and maintaining global networks through practical skills in communication, intercultural competence, and partnership development. The course should highlight the tangible benefits of such collaborations—like resource access, knowledge exchange, and innovative practices—by showcasing successful youth-led international projects to inspire participants. Facilitating networking opportunities through virtual activities, joint projects, and peer exchanges will encourage participants to identify potential partners and develop plans for sustaining these relationships. Exposure to a global perspective on youth engagement, social inclusion, and sustainability—via guest speakers, case studies, and discussions—will broaden participants' understanding of diverse approaches and challenges. Including intercultural dialogue exercises and cultural sensitivity training will foster cross-cultural understanding and adaptability, reinforcing that local actions are part of a broader global movement. Overall, integrating international networking into the course will empower youth leaders to think globally, act locally, and develop sustainable partnerships, preparing them to contribute proactively to international youth and social development initiatives.

The final question pertains to other needs, preferences, or suggestions for the ENGAGE project. Participants expressed interest in specializing in outdoor, experiential, and Service Learning education—approaches similar to those applied in schools across the Nordic countries of Europe. They highlighted the importance of creating a platform for youth leaders within the country to facilitate easier identification, acquaintance, and communication among them. Participants also suggested developing international volunteer projects and providing support for the implementation of local initiatives to enhance impact and collaboration within the ENGAGE project. For the ENGAGE project, it would be beneficial to include training sessions on current topics such as the use of digital technologies in youth activities or innovative leadership approaches. Additionally, integrating a mentorship system between youth leaders from different countries could promote the exchange of ideas and best practices. Continuous feedback from participants would also help adapt and improve the project as it progresses.

Organizing practical workshops on topics like leadership, project management, and effective communication would be valuable. Other suggestions included creating an online platform where youth leaders can exchange ideas and resources, offering mentorship from international experts for young people involved in leadership projects, and increasing funding opportunities for local youth initiatives.

## 4. Conclusions

Based on the research findings, partners have a valuable opportunity to design a youth leadership course that is highly responsive to participants' expressed interests and needs. The strong enthusiasm

for the proposed topics and preferred learning formats provides a clear foundation for customizing the curriculum to maximize engagement and effectiveness.

The insights reveal that the course should be structured as a flexible, blended program that combines theoretical knowledge with practical exercises, case studies, and mentorship opportunities. Emphasizing active participation, peer learning, and real-world application will align with participant expectations and foster meaningful skill development. Additionally, providing accessible resources, networking opportunities, and support tools will empower youth leaders to effectively implement projects and initiatives.

By tailoring modules around motivation, leadership, communication, civic engagement, digital literacy, and resource mobilization—areas identified as priorities—the course will remain relevant and impactful. Ultimately, leveraging these research insights will enable developers to create a dynamic, engaging training experience that results in motivated, skilled youth leaders capable of making significant contributions to their communities and beyond.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Eurostat 2021, "Population and housing census 2021: first EU results", 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230330-2>
- [2] European Union, "Understanding youth engagement in Europe through open data", 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/understanding-youth-engagement-europe-through-open-data>
- [3] European Commission, "Flash Eurobarometer survey 545: Youth and democracy. Brussels: European Commission", 2023. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181>
- [4] European Youth Forum, "Democracy and young people", 2024. <https://www.youthforum.org/topics/democracy-and-young-people>
- [5] Dezelan, T., "Study on key trends in youth participation and youth organisations' responses to them, 2024, <https://rm.coe.int/study-tomaz-dezelan/1680b1fc4a>
- [6] Cammaerts, M. Bruter, S. Banaji, S. Harrison and N. Anstead, "Youth Participation in Democratic Life: Stories of Hope and Disillusion". Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, 2016, 237 pages.
- [7] Tatar, M.I. & Apateanu, D., "Multiple Exclusions: Civic and Political Disengagement of Vulnerable Youth in the European Union" (August 26, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3493811> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3493811>
- [8] Apateanu, D & Tatar, M.I., "An Introduction into the Civic Dimension of Social Exclusion: the Case of Romanian Youth", Jean Monnet International Conference, A social Europe for youth: education to employment, Univ. of Debrecen Press, 2017.
- [9] Voinea, R.C., "Involving Young People in Democratic Decisions: Consultation Mechanisms and Opportunities", Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques, No. 84, 2024, 229 – 239, [https://cis01.ucv.ro/revistadestiintepolitice/files/numarul84\\_2024/19.pdf](https://cis01.ucv.ro/revistadestiintepolitice/files/numarul84_2024/19.pdf)
- [10] European Parliament, "Young people's participation in European democratic processes", 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL\\_STU\(2023\)745820\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU(2023)745820_EN.pdf)
- [11] Centrul roman de politici europene, "50 Policy Recommendations for Enhancing Civic Engagement of Youth", 2024, <https://www.crpe.ro/en/50-policy-recommendations-for-enhancing-civic-engagement-of-youth/open> data, <https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/understanding-youth-engagement-europe-through-open-data>
- [12] The Research Center for Civil Society, "Civic Engagement Landscape Romania 2024", [https://democracycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Civic-Engagement\\_FINAL\\_FULL\\_04.02.2025.pdf](https://democracycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Civic-Engagement_FINAL_FULL_04.02.2025.pdf)
- [13] ENGAGE project, 2024, <http://engageyouth.ro>