

## Communicating the European Union in Rural Areas: Recommendations for Youth Work



**Recommendation 1: Tailor methods and topics to the target group**

**Recommendation 2: Strengthen young people's say through local participation in EU matters**

**Recommendation 3: Involve participants in organisation processes**

**Recommendation 4: Support and aim for transnational perspectives**

**Recommendation 5: Do not simply make EU advertising**

Many people in rural areas have the **feeling that the European Union is far away** and has nothing to do with their lives. This also applies to **young people**. So how can they be motivated to actively use the information and participation rights to which they are entitled and thus become more involved as citizens of the EU?

This handout contains **suggestions for the development of innovative formats and methods of European work on the ground**. In our understanding, active European citizenship depends on at least **3 conditions**: (1) People must **know their rights**. (2) They must know **how to use them**. (3) They must be convinced that they **can make a difference**.

The recommendations are based on findings generated by the **Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence at Leipzig University (Germany)**.



Lorenz, A. und Anders, Lisa H. (eds.) 2023: EU Citizenship Beyond Urban Centres. Perceptions and Practices of Young People in East Central European Peripheral Areas. Berlin: Springer. (**Open Access**)



20 **focus group discussions** with 171 students aged 16 and 17 at 10 secondary and professional schools located in very remote rural areas; standardised **mini survey** with 264 participants in the schools; **interviews** with the staff of 6 Erasmus+-funded **youth dialogue projects**








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





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## Recommendation 1: Tailor Methods and Topics of the Target Group

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|    | <p><i>“...so it’s really a project from young people to other young people, not from above.”</i><br/>Organiser of a youth project in Poland</p>   |
|    | <p>All interviewed project organisers of EU-funded youth dialogues stressed the necessity to tailor covered topics and methods to the targeted audience. Depending on the target group’s age, the level of knowledge that can be assumed and the strategies that can be used to get young people interested in EU politics and participation differ. Some people are experienced in political projects, volunteering and rural development, others not. If the target group is mixed, project organisers should take such different levels of experience into account and integrate them well.</p>  |
|    | <p>Adapting the methods and contents of a youth project to the target group, region and environment is necessary from the early planning stage. What works can be very different across Europe, regions and schools.</p>  |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Adapt complexity of information material according to target group:</b> Especially for younger and/or less experienced target groups, less information and shorter duration of events as well as game-oriented elements can increase motivation. The school year and holiday periods should be considered.</li> <li>- <b>Develop strategies for mixed target groups:</b> If experiences and prior knowledge differ greatly in the target group, formats should be chosen that allow for knowledge exchange and mutual learning. Therefore, task and discussion questions should be prepared in different levels of complexity. Make sure a safe and non-judgemental environment is created where participants can freely express their ideas. Depending on the level of knowledge and motivation, more or less input must be given.</li> </ul>  |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Do not let adults (exclusively) organise events for young people:</b> Often events are planned by adults FOR young people, without involving them or giving them enough responsibility. This is demotivating and presents a missed opportunity of making the project relevant. In longer-running projects, participants should be involved in the early stages of project planning if possible (see Recommendation No. 3).</li> <li>- <b>Do not discuss abstract topics in a purely theoretical way:</b> Young people may find it difficult to discuss “big” EU issues. It is advisable to discuss topics with direct relevance to their “real” life and to show the EU’s impact on this. This brings EU policy closer and makes it more tangible for “EU newcomers”. Ensure concrete recommendations and outcomes are achieved which can then be implemented by local decision makers (see Recommendation No. 2).</li> </ul> |






## Recommendation 2: Strengthen Young People’s Say Through Local Participation in EU Matters

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|    | <p><i>“We try to have a real dialogue with the decision makers so that they [the participants] have a positive experience. That their voice is being counted, that they really can change something ... So that’s the focus of all the debate activities with the decision makers. That we don’t do the classical panel debate, where it’s a Q&amp;A session and they just raise their hand, and the politician or decision maker will just reply to them.”</i></p> <p>Organiser of a youth project in the Czech Republic and Slovakia</p>   |
|    | <p>Many young people think that their voice does not count in the EU. However, the belief that one can effectively participate in politics and one’s input is worthwhile is important for an active citizenship. Projects should therefore focus on problems that directly affect young people, deal with local issues, and involve local politics. Through such changes, young participants can experience first-hand that their political activities can make a difference. This contributes to the projects’ visibility and increases the target group’s willingness and motivation to participate. Ideally, such projects illustrate the impact the EU can have on regional problems and contexts (e.g. improving the technical equipment of schools and public transport for young people).</p>   |
|  | <p>Youth participation projects on EU matters are only meaningful if they are inclusive and lead to noticeable changes. Ideally, they show links between the local and the EU level and illustrate the EU’s influence on everyday life.</p>  |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Focus on concrete effects:</b> Project results should be measurable and related to the lives of young people. Positive experiences with their own influence encourage them to stay involved even after the project is over.</li> <li>- <b>Involve people from the EU, state and regional politics:</b> Ideally, they should be in regular contact with young people and explain how they take their needs into account.</li> <li>- <b>Long-term cooperation:</b> It is important to have a long-term commitment from partners rather than one-off events to build trust and also attract the quieter youth. Policy ideas developed in youth projects should subsequently be implemented locally or fed into policy processes at national or EU level.</li> <li>- <b>Commitment:</b> A written agreement between local project promoters and politicians or administrators is optimal, in which the willingness to take the project results into account are recorded.</li> </ul> |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Do not produce output without assurances of concrete change:</b> Merely creating “output” with no prospect of implementation and tangible change should be avoided. Results should be taken seriously and responsibilities must not be shifted back and forth.</li> <li>- <b>Do not create hierarchies by mainly inviting “big names” or using academic language:</b> The presence of EU personalities can attract an interested audience, but it can also have an intimidating effect on young people and might create hierarchies. Any dialogue between young people and policymakers should take place on an equal footing and in a relaxed environment. Avoid complex technical terms. Events conducted in the local language facilitate the participation of various social groups.</li> </ul>  |

### Recommendation 3: Involve Participants in Organisation Processes






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|    | <p><i>“Young people can get involved in quite responsible tasks very quickly. We had people who are sixteen, fifteen dealing with budgets and organising activities they are not used to. However, they learn very quickly.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Organiser of a youth project in Poland</p>   |
|    | <p>Especially if the project leaders are significantly older than the young people, it can be difficult to identify relevant topics (only) through research and to meet the needs of young people. They are a heterogeneous target group with different interests, social backgrounds, needs and knowledge. Communication trends and relevant topics are fluid and change frequently.</p> <p>Therefore, another success factor for youth dialogue projects is the serious involvement of the target group before, during and after the project. This ensures that the project is an initiative of the young people themselves. They acquire skills and knowledge that are useful for their later professional life and it might motivate them to continue their involvement.</p>                    |
|   | <p>Meaningful involvement of the target group throughout the project, including in early project stages and during the evaluation, is crucial in identifying relevant topics, meeting young people’s needs, and allowing them to develop their knowledge and skills under appropriate supervision.</p>  |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Organise brainstorming and consultation before the start of the actual project:</b> Prior to the project, meetings or workshops with young people should be arranged to develop the project goals and topics together.</li> <li>- <b>Build a “train the trainers” system:</b> Train young people in organisational issues so they can transfer this knowledge to their peers and organise their own projects. Use digital sources and open-access tools to provide relevant information.</li> <li>- <b>Share budget responsibility:</b> Young people feel taken seriously when they are entrusted with money. If possible, provide money for small projects and involve young people in relevant financial decisions related to the project.</li> </ul> |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Do not overburden young people:</b> Young people are confronted with school demands and other responsibilities. They may feel overwhelmed if too much organisational work is imposed on them in youth projects. Too many choices can also overwhelm them and slow down the organisational process. A clear distribution of tasks and structured guidance from experienced adults is needed, for example in the form of regular meetings, via WhatsApp or Telegram groups, or training sessions.</li> </ul>  |

## Recommendation 4: Support and Aim for Transnational Perspectives

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|    | <p><i>“It’s more motivational for them if it’s international.”</i><br/>Organiser of a youth project in the Czech Republic and Slovakia</p> <p><i>“I very strongly believe in those international projects: the youth exchanges ... can make a huge difference. ... I would say in my city, the students don’t speak [English] very well. But then sending them to any international project, for a week or two, it really opens them up.”</i><br/>Organiser of a youth project in Poland</p>   |
|    | <p>Internationality can enrich youth projects. Meeting people from other European countries with similar experiences – e.g. living in peripheral rural areas or having a similar culture – can foster a European identity and feeling of community and solidarity. In this way, solutions to structural problems that young people face in their everyday lives can be discussed and cross-border solutions developed. In addition, transnational contact among EU citizens encourages respect for other perspectives on certain issues. It provides the possibility to learn from each other, gain intercultural competences and develop language skills. Therefore, youth projects should include international elements such as excursions and field trips, WhatsApp and Telegram groups, or longer exchanges and long-term cooperation.</p>  |
|  | <p>By incorporating a transnational perspective and fostering projects and cooperation across EU Member States, youth participation projects can address shared structural problems and strengthen European identity, intercultural competences and language skills.</p>   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Start with small international elements</b>, for example through discussions with young people from a neighbouring country via social media. More elaborate excursions or exchanges can follow later.</li> <li>- <b>Develop strategies to cope with language barriers:</b> Transnational projects confront participants with language barriers and often attract an already-privileged target group. Organisers are advised to address these problems by providing translations, intensive language courses or translation tools which young people often have on their smartphone.</li> </ul>   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Do not ignore the local context:</b> While incorporating a transnational perspective is important, unique local contexts and challenges of each participating region should not be neglected. Trips abroad should be accompanied by meetings beforehand and afterwards. These allow participants to share their experiences with local peers or make use of their acquired skills in their known environment.</li> <li>- <b>Do not ignore the fact that international trips can foster social exclusion:</b> Especially if there is no funding, be aware that not all young people can participate.</li> <li>- <b>Do not explain the responsibilities too late:</b> Trips and excursions can attract participants. However, the willingness to take part in preparation sessions and activities can be lower. Be clear about the commitments to avoid disappointments for both the participants and organisers.</li> </ul> |



## Recommendation 5: Do Not Simply Make EU Advertising

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|    | <p><i>“... not to be pushed into something by the European Union. [To convey] that it has its benefits [is ok] – but being pushed into something is one thing I’m worried about.”</i></p> <p>Male secondary student from Sokolov, Czech Republic</p>   |
|    | <p>In remote rural areas (young) people can be sceptical towards the EU due to a sense of being overlooked. Sometimes, this perception is based on experiences with national and regional politicians and not directly with the EU. EU actors and the information material they provide are sometimes perceived as a “commercial show” or propaganda from Brussels. Even independent projects on EU issues are often suspected of being organised or commissioned by the EU. When individuals feel that they are to be politically convinced of something, they often reject the project altogether. Those who participate in EU projects, organise events in collaboration with EU decision makers or institutions, or receive EU funds may be perceived as “EU agents” without their own ideas and unique political messages.</p>  |
|   | <p>Events and projects conducted in collaboration with EU institutions or financed by EU funds are often perceived as mere advertising far from local realities. This can contribute to rejection, especially in peripheral rural areas.</p>   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Talk about problems and weaknesses of the EU:</b> Be transparent about the challenges and shortcomings of EU youth policy and youth work to build credibility and address possible concerns.</li> <li>- <b>Foster sustainable collaboration:</b> Avoid one-off events with “big” politicians without ongoing engagement or opportunities for interaction. This can seem superficial. Instead, a long-term partnership should be built.</li> <li>- <b>Customise communication to the local context:</b> Themes and language should be adapted to resonate with the cultural, social and economic characteristics of the area. Address local events, people and anecdotes. Make use of local newspapers (especially free newspapers), radio stations or noticeboards to spread information and be accessible to everyone.</li> </ul> |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Do not hold a “commercial show” for the EU:</b> People compare their local realities with what they are told by officials. Avoid making statements or using materials that could be perceived as insincere, unrealistic or without substance.</li> <li>- <b>Do not only use EU information material:</b> While the EU offers a wide range of information material, using it might contribute to the perception of being an “EU agent”. If EU information material is used, it should be adapted to the local context. Avoid the excessive use of EU symbols.</li> <li>- <b>Avoid the narrative that the EU has invented many good things</b> that the Member States now just need to implement. Instead, start the narrative with the people on the ground and listen to them.</li> </ul>  |