

How to Engage Young People in Remote Areas of East Central Europe for European Union Politics – Recommendations for EU Actors



Recommendation 1: Tailor information transfer to the needs of young people

Recommendation 2: Give young people a say in local EU matters

Recommendation 3: Ensure more reliable funding for EU youth projects

Recommendation 4: Make bottom-up EU dialogues more inclusive

Recommendation 5: Don't make a "commercial show" for the EU

Many people in rural regions have the feeling that Europe 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 and thus become more involved as citizens of the EU?

This handout makes suggestions how the European Commission and the European Parliament can **improve their youth policy for remote regions** (areas far away from cities). The **European Parliament** has declared its willingness to enhance an active EU citizenship and the **Commission** promotes exchanges between the Member States and runs the Erasmus+ programme.

Active EU citizenship depends on at least **3 conditions**: (1) People must **know their rights**, (2) they must know **how to use them**, and (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. and 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 in very remote areas; standardised **mini survey** with 264 students in these schools; **interviews** with the staff of 6 Erasmus+-funded **youth dialogue projects**








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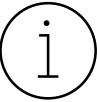





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Recommendation 1: Tailor Information Transfer to the Needs of Young People

	<p>“We don’t know what power these people in the European Parliament have over our lives and we choose not to participate, not to express our opinion, because we don’t know if we are expressing our opinion right or wrong.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Female secondary-school student from Caransebeş, Romania</p>
	<p>The EU institutions have comprehensive information dissemination and social media strategies: they provide online portals and produce information material and videos. They aim to reach young people by relying on social media and target-group-specific websites, podcasts and videos.</p> <p>However, research has shown that EU citizens, and young people in particular, do not consider themselves well informed. This was also reflected in the group discussions. Young people in East Central European peripheries often lack basic knowledge about the EU and the rights and freedoms connected to it. In addition, they claim that not enough was being done by the EU institutions and political actors on other levels to raise awareness of EU topics. Like in public transport, the “final mile” of communicating the offered information to the young recipients seems to be lacking.</p>
	<p>Young people often feel uninformed about EU topics. The EU institutions’ information dissemination and social media strategies seem to be of limited visibility and effectiveness. The “final mile” of connecting the EU’s offers with the young people is missing.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support national efforts to increase the importance of EU issues in formal education: EU decision makers are advised to foster exchanges among Member States about EU education in schools, for instance by making EU education one of the focus topics of the European Education Area or continuing to provide and promote easily accessible teaching materials on EU-related topics. They should further encourage cooperation between schools and youth organisations providing non-formal learning opportunities, for example by creating monetary incentives for youth organisations to cooperate with schools in EU projects. - Improve social media and information dissemination strategies, for example by making use of influencers from the target group and working with youth-oriented multipliers on social media. This can also help to overcome language barriers and generational gaps. In our focus group discussions, students recommended cooperating more with young influencers who are prominent in the respective Member State. - Don’t rely on the English language alone: Use and offer AI translation tools as often as possible to avoid social bias in the communication.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Don’t rely on existing social media only: The present social media strategy does not seem to reach enough young people in the East Central European periphery. - Don’t overestimate formal education: Curricula often contain a great number of topics, hindering profound and in-depth education on EU politics.






Recommendation 2: Give Young People a Say in Local EU Matters

	<p><i>“But if you make it on the local level and you have young people who say, we want to have a youth counsellor or we want to have an additional night bus [...]. And the city makes this bus run. Then you can really start believing that your voice matters.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Organiser of a youth project in Poland</p>
	<p>Many young people think that their voice does not count in the EU. However, political efficacy (defined as the belief that one can effectively participate in politics and one’s input is worthwhile) is important for an active citizenship. It can best be enhanced in local participation projects which focus on political problems that concern young people directly and by involving local decision makers. Actual changes resulting from participatory projects depend to a large degree on the will of local politicians. The EU should strive to increase the motivation of local decision makers to participate in youth dialogue projects. 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), especially since the regional or national decision makers are often not perceived as helpful in these matters, as our group discussions revealed.</p>
	<p>Youth participation projects on EU matters are only meaningful if they are inclusive and result in tangible changes. Ideally, they show links between the local and the EU level and illustrate the EU’s influence on everyday life (e.g. by improving the technical equipment of schools and public transport for young people).</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appeal to local political decision makers and develop specific guidelines on youth participation on the local level to put pressure on officials to establish a closer relationship with young people, e.g. by organising youth dialogues or establishing contact persons for young people. - Take the perspective of young people in remote areas: What would you expect from the EU to improve your life? - Become active yourself: MEPs and other EU actors 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. A long-term commitment of the MEPs is important in this context. A single event with decision makers from Brussels will not have the same effect. Political ideas developed in youth projects then need to be realised by the local administration or incorporated into EU-level decision-making.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Don’t produce output without assurances of tangible outcomes on the part of the local decision makers. - Don’t create hierarchies by only inviting “big names”: The presence of EU personalities can draw a large audience, but it might create hierarchies and intimidate rather than encourage participation. Any dialogue between young people and policy-makers needs to be substantiated and on an equal footing. This can also be fostered by avoiding complex technical terms and conducting events in the local language rather than relying on English as the lingua franca. - Don’t only visit once: Short-lived commitment and projects could discourage youth participation.






Recommendation 3: Ensure More Reliable Funding for EU Youth Projects

	<p>“Well, I don’t have many connections with people in the EU, so I don’t know or have any friends outside Hungary, so it doesn’t mean much to me, except that ... if we go to another country, we don’t need a passport, and that’s it. It doesn’t really affect anything else in my life that I know of.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Female secondary-school student from Siófok, Hungary</p>
	<p>In areas outside cities, young people are not well connected to their peers in other regions or European countries. There is a lack of youth work and of sites for young people to meet, to discuss and to participate. Youth workers often experience uncertainty or unsustainable employment conditions. Many parents do not allow their children to participate in projects and trips that cost money.</p> <p>Short-lived EU funding periods lead to high staff turnover, which prevents the building of relationships with young people and hampers the smooth running of the programmes. EU Youth Dialogues are organised in 18-month work cycles and youth projects funded by Erasmus+ have a duration of two years. As a result, the projects have to constantly seek sources of funding. This ties up their time, particularly when the organisations are small. 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.</p>
	<p>Funding for EU projects and sustainability in financial terms are key to successful youth work aimed at fostering active EU citizenship at the local level. Long-lasting, effective projects in the periphery need permanent local structures which are not reliant on limited funding periods.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide more reliable funding for EU-related youth projects in remote areas, e.g. by applying quotas in the framework of Erasmus+. - Extend the work cycles of EU Youth Dialogue projects and the duration of Erasmus+-funded projects. - Lower hurdles for receiving follow-up project grants in remote areas. - Actively encourage Member States to provide further financial support for youth organisations working on EU issues outside the cities. - Create further incentives for decentralising the EU youth work infrastructure, for instance by reserving a certain proportion of project funds for projects in remote regions.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Don’t rely on overly short funding periods: Many independent organisations, NGOs and associations conducting EU projects can currently only plan for short periods and constantly have to seek the next funding opportunity. - Don’t take youth work and opportunities for youth participation in the Member States for granted: In some countries, youth work is happening under difficult conditions and organisers are facing funding cuts and political pressure.

Recommendation 4: Make Bottom-up EU Dialogue Formats More Inclusive

	<p><i>“If you look into the detail, the participants of these kinds of international projects are always the same, from the same elite schools, from the regional capitals of the countries. But our primary focus is to also reach those who are excluded. That come from the region, that do not have the language skills, that do not have the money.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Organiser of a youth project in Czechia and Slovakia</p>
	<p>Young people associate very different things with the EU and find different EU rights important. Our research showed a variety of possible associations and interpretations related to the EU. There is no dominant narrative of European integration and its achievements, even in remote regions which are marked by equal contexts, like a long distance to services of public interest. National and regional context and living conditions vary considerably, influencing the importance of the EU and its rights for young people.</p> <p>EU actors need to further improve the inclusiveness of bottom-up dialogue formats towards people from remote areas to make sure that the ideas of young people on the ground can carry equal weight. This can be achieved by holding events in smaller towns, picking meeting hours in correspondence with the local public transport timetables, or providing information in local language. It is crucial to provide not just one narrative and culture but to account for diverse local contexts.</p>
	<p>EU policies, including youth policy, should not be based on a single narrative. They should be connected to the diverse living conditions in the Member States and their different regions. People need to feel addressed by the language and topics of dialogues and the options for participation.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue to base youth policy on a broad basis: The eleven European Youth Objectives are broad enough to provide starting points for diverse projects that link European objectives with young people’s local engagement in very different contexts. EU actors should make sure that the EU youth policy priorities continue to speak to all young people across the Union. - Make the Structured Dialogue more inclusive: The bottom-up approach to involve young people in the formulation of youth policy priorities through the Structured Dialogue is reliant on young people from urban centres and should therefore become more inclusive. EU key players need to ensure that the voices of young people in urban areas are not overrepresented. - Actively reach out to projects and young people in different remote areas and use the local language to enhance inclusivity. - Ensure that remote areas and their inhabitants are visually represented and acknowledged in information material, flyers or event invitations. Keep in mind that there is no one view from the periphery, but many.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Don’t use a one-size-fits-all model of information and participation for all young people or people outside urban centres. - Don’t rely on existing relations with urban-based youth workers and projects.

Recommendation 5: Don't Make a "Commercial Show" for the EU

	<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-school student from Sokolov, Czechia</p>
	<p>In remote areas, decision makers, potential organisers and young people can be sceptical towards the EU and its institutions, due to a sense of being overlooked and not benefiting as much. Sometimes, this perception is based on experiences with national and regional politicians and not directly with the EU. EU actors and the information material provided by them are sometimes perceived as a "commercial show" or "propaganda" from Brussels. Even independent projects dealing with EU politics are often suspected of being events run or commissioned by the EU. If individuals feel that they should be educated and convinced of something, they are more likely to reject the project or opportunity altogether.</p>
	<p>The social media and information policies of EU institutions are often perceived as mere advertising far from local realities, which can contribute to rejection, especially in remote areas.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Admit problems and weaknesses: Be transparent about the challenges and shortcomings of the EU youth policy and youth work in general to build credibility and address possible concerns. - Get a thorough understanding of local problems: Conduct local needs assessments with the help of local stakeholders and community members and visit remote areas to spend time interacting with community members. Participate in community activities or attend local events to better understand the local context. - Work together with (young) local politicians: Engage with decision makers at the local level to gain trust and support. - Foster sustainable collaboration: Avoid a superficial approach by investing in long-term partnerships and avoid "parachuting" MEPs into panel discussions without ongoing engagement or opportunities for interaction. - Tailor communication to the local context: Adapt messaging and communication channels to resonate with the cultural, social and economic characteristics of the area. Incorporate local language and dialects in the communication materials, utilise local stories and examples, and make use of offline information channels such as local newspapers (especially free local papers), radio stations or community noticeboards.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid creating a "commercial show" for the EU and its regional or youth policy: People compare their local realities with what they are told by officials. Steer clear of providing information material that may be perceived as insincere, unrealistic or lacking in substance, since it might contribute to scepticism or even rejection. - Don't use the narrative that the EU has invented good things that the Member States shall implement. Instead, start the narrative from the people on the ground and listen to them.