

Civic involvement of young people

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Summary

Active youth participation in community life is a central focus for fostering civic engagement, as highlighted by the National Youth Strategy project for 2023-2027. Studies indicate a concerning trend of low youth engagement across various civic domains, including social, economic, cultural, and political spheres.

This underscores the importance of initiatives outlined in the European Youth Strategy to enhance youth involvement. However, despite legal provisions mandating youth participation, there is a notable lack of interest among young people in consultative processes at the national level.

Additionally, challenges persist in engaging vulnerable youth groups, while issues like tokenism and superficial engagement in decision-making processes remain prevalent. In response, initiatives like the InvoYouth project aim to address youth disengagement by identifying key factors influencing participation and developing strategies to promote active youth involvement in community activities.

The study on civic involvement of young people in Bucharest aims to assess their motivation and level of engagement in their communities, as well as to identify reasons for their lack of involvement. Objectives include measuring motivation levels, exploring reasons for non-participation, and identifying needs that could enhance their participation.

Data collection methods included desk research, secondary data analysis, a focus group, and an online survey targeting individuals aged 13 to 30. The convenience-based sample collected from December 15, 2023, to March 15, 2024, yielded 180 responses of which 171 were complete, predominantly from well-educated individuals. Though results are not generalizable, they offer valuable insights for future projects.

Key findings include a predominantly male (63%) and student (71%) respondent group, with an important proportion having completed high school (64%). Approximately half (51%) had voted in recent elections.

Summary

The study reveals the fact that young participants highly value electoral participation and engagement in various civic actions, prioritizing expressing opinions on social or political issues, volunteering, and charitable actions over political party membership.

The data shows young people participate in various activities, with strong involvement in youth organizations and volunteering. However, engagement with political organizations is notably low.

Also, the involvement in the decision-making process is low among young people, with only 26% contacting a politician about an issue, 40% participating in a public consultation, and 45% participating in protests or street demonstrations.



Key motivators for participation include accumulating experience, personal development, and the desire to help others, as well as socializing and obtaining a certificate.

Additionally, factors such as the desire to solve encountered problems and gain recognition are important for almost half of the respondents. At the same time, young people's participation is often motivated by self-interest (depending on the rewards or benefits received) or group-oriented (participation under peer pressure or the need for group belonging).

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At the same time, young people's participation is often motivated by self-interest (depending on the rewards or benefits received) or group-oriented (participation under peer pressure or the need for group belonging).

The study also highlights barriers to participation in community activities, such as lack of confidence that they can make a difference, convenience, and poor promotion of community activities.

Education and promotion of cultural activities for young people are the most appealing areas for involvement, while technological innovation and helping the homeless gather less interest.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of fostering youth participation through diverse opportunities and addressing barriers to engagement.



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Studies indicate a concerning trend of low youth engagement across various civic domains, including social, economic, cultural, and political spheres. This underscores the importance of initiatives outlined in the European Youth Strategy to enhance youth involvement. However, despite legal provisions mandating youth participation, there is a notable lack of interest among young people in consultative processes at the national level.

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The data shows young people participate in various activities, with strong involvement in youth organizations and volunteering. However, engagement with political organizations is notably low. Also, the involvement in the decision-making process is low among young people, with only 26% contacting a politician about an issue, 40% participating in a public consultation, and 45% participating in protests or street demonstrations.

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Introduction

The strengthening of active citizenship through diversifying the forms of youth participation in community life constitutes one of the priorities of the National Youth Strategy project for the period 2023 – 2027.

Studies underpinning both the national and European strategies indicate that the level of youth participation in various civic actions is low.

Youth participation encompasses the active and voluntary engagement of young individuals in social, economic, cultural, and political domains. It extends beyond specific actions and activities to include participation in decision-making processes that impact both themselves and their communities.

According to Hart's Participation Scale, participation is a continuum that ranges from manipulation and tokenism to higher forms of participation. While the former two do not represent real forms of participation, at the opposite end of the scale are the higher forms of participation where young people initiate, direct, and share decisions with adults.

The scale highlights two essential characteristics of authentic youth participation. Firstly, participation is not a binary phenomenon, as the presence of a young person does not automatically guarantee their participation.

It is very important to enable young people to take an active role in decision-making processes. Second, the partnership between young people and adults plays a crucial role.



Introduction

Given the importance of youth engagement within the EU context, a specific focus of the European Youth Strategy involves enhancing youth participation, which is one of its eleven objectives. The 9th goal, **“Space and Participation for All”**, within the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 aims to strengthen young people’s democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces across all areas of society. This goal encompasses the following specific objectives:

- Ensure young people can adequately influence all areas of society and all parts of the decision-making processes, from agenda setting to implementation, monitoring and evaluation through youth-friendly and accessible mechanisms and structures, ensuring that policies respond to the needs of young people.
- Ensure equal access to everyday decision making for all young people from different backgrounds.
- Increase youth participation and thus equal representation in the electoral process as well as in elected bodies and other decision-making organs at all levels of society.
- Provide youth-led physical facilities and infrastructures called youth spaces defined by being autonomous, open, and safe, accessible to all, offering professional support for development and ensuring opportunities for youth participation.
- Ensure safe virtual youth spaces are accessible to every young person which provide access to information and services as well as ensure opportunities for youth participation.
- Ensure sustainable funding, common recognition, and development of quality youth work in order to strengthen youth organisations and their role in inclusion, participation, and non-formal education.
- Provide youth-friendly, relevant, comprehensive information, also developed by and with young people, in order to enable youth participation.

At the national level, the public policy framework regulating youth participation in decision-making includes, in addition to the National Youth Strategy 2023 – 2027, the Youth Law (Law 350/2006), which mandates the representation and involvement of young people in decision-making processes through youth organisations. According to the provisions of Law 350, the involvement of young people must be facilitated by central and local authorities, who are responsible for ensuring the necessary framework for youth consultation. However, the analysis of the current situation within the National Youth Strategy 2023 – 2027 reveals a high level of disinterest among young people in participating in the consultative processes initiated by the authorities on issues of interest to them.

The "Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life" (European Commission, 2021) shows that extending the definition of youth up to the age of 30, as adopted by Romania (alongside Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain), has led to youth representative structures (e.g., the Romanian Youth Council, the Romanian Youth Forum) reflecting the views of young adults rather than those under 18. Consequently, most young people under 18 participate in decision-making processes through Student Associations or Children's Councils, primarily focusing on education-related issues.

The "Diagnosis 2020 – The Situation of Youth and Their Expectations" study (IRES, 2020) indicates an increase in the proportion of respondents who believe that young people cannot influence important decisions at the local, national, or European levels, compared to 2018 (rising from 12% to 19% at the local level and from 18% to 27% at the national level). According to the same study, civic activism is extremely low among young people, with only 13% of youth, and 12% of vulnerable youth included in the study, being part of an association or organisation in 2020. This is an increase from 2018 when only 8% reported being part of an association. Notably, most young people are members of student or youth associations (45% in 2020) or informal youth groups (53%).



Among those who reported being part of an association or organisation, 52% are in humanitarian associations, 22% in cultural-artistic organisations, 17% in ecological associations, and 15% in sports associations.

Despite the low involvement in organisations and associations, half of the young people have participated in volunteer activities in recent years, with 19% involved in those organised by NGOs.

The main reasons young people do not join associations/organisations are lack of time (38%), lack of interest in such activities (17%), and very limited awareness of NGO activities (17%) (IRES, 2020).

Various studies (IRES, 2020; European Commission, 2021; Deliu et al., 2022) highlight the extremely low participation of vulnerable/disadvantaged youth (e.g., rural areas, children with disabilities, Roma children) in decision-making processes, identifying them as a group difficult to recruit/mobilise for participation. Tokenism is a prevalent issue in youth participation in Romania (Deliu et al., 2022). Youth consultations, even on issues directly affecting them, are often superficial, with public authorities lacking trust in young people's ability to form pertinent opinions and preferring expert opinions. Most participatory processes focus on informing young people rather than involving them in developing solutions to their problems

The study on civic engagement and participation of young people in community activities is being conducted as part of the InvoYouth project, which is funded by the Erasmus+ programme and registered under number 2023-1-RO01-KA210-YOU-000160174. The aim of the InvoYouth project aims is to identify the causes of youth disengagement at the community level and to develop tools that contribute to addressing these causes.

The research conducted within the InvoYouth project aims to identify the main activities that young people wish to participate in, the various forms of youth participation, and the factors influencing young people's decision to participate or not.

Objectives and methodology

The study on civic involvement of young people aims to determine the extent to which young people living or studying in Bucharest are motivated to engage in their communities. Additionally, in cases where young people are not motivated to participate, the study aimed to identify the main causes of their lack of involvement.

Therefore, the research aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- Measure the motivation of young people to engage in their communities and their level of previous involvement.
- Identify the reasons for the lack of involvement of young people in their communities.
- Identify the needs of young people that would enhance their motivation to participate.

The study on youth participation in the community was based on desk research and secondary data analysis, a focus group with young people (6 participants) and an online survey with a questionnaire administered through the LimeSurvey platform. The online survey targeted young people aged between 13 and 30 years old. Data collection took place from December 15, 2023, to March 15, 2024. At the end of this period, 180 questionnaires were completed, with 171 fully completed and 9 partially completed.



The questionnaire was distributed on all the social networks pages of the Romanian Academic Society (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and shared in groups formed with participants from past projects. Moreover, it was shared with local youth NGOs, including student organisations. Towards the end of the response gathering period, the questionnaire was also shared person-to-person.

Therefore, the resulting sample is convenience-based, not probabilistic. The invitation to participate in the study reached mainly well-educated young people with better access to technology, from the networks of the study initiators. Such a sample does not allow for generalization of results but enables analyses to discuss relationships between variables. Additionally, it provides valuable insights and serves as a good starting point for the organisation's future projects in the field of youth participation.



The young people who responded to our online survey are aged between 16 and 30 years old ($n = 175$), with an average age of 21 years. Male respondents predominate (63%); 36% of respondents are female, and only 1% selected the "non-binary/other options" for the gender question.

The largest proportion of respondents have completed high school (64%), 18% have completed college, 11% have a master's degree, less than 1% have a PhD, and 6% have completed middle school.

Regarding occupational status, respondents are mostly students (71%). 17% of respondents are employed, and 8% are students. 3% of respondents are both employed and enrolled in education (college or master's). Less than 1% of respondents are self-employed or freelancers. Half of the respondents (51%) voted in the last local/national/European elections, and only 5% declare that they did not vote. The other 44% were not of legal age to vote at the time of the last elections ($n=179$).



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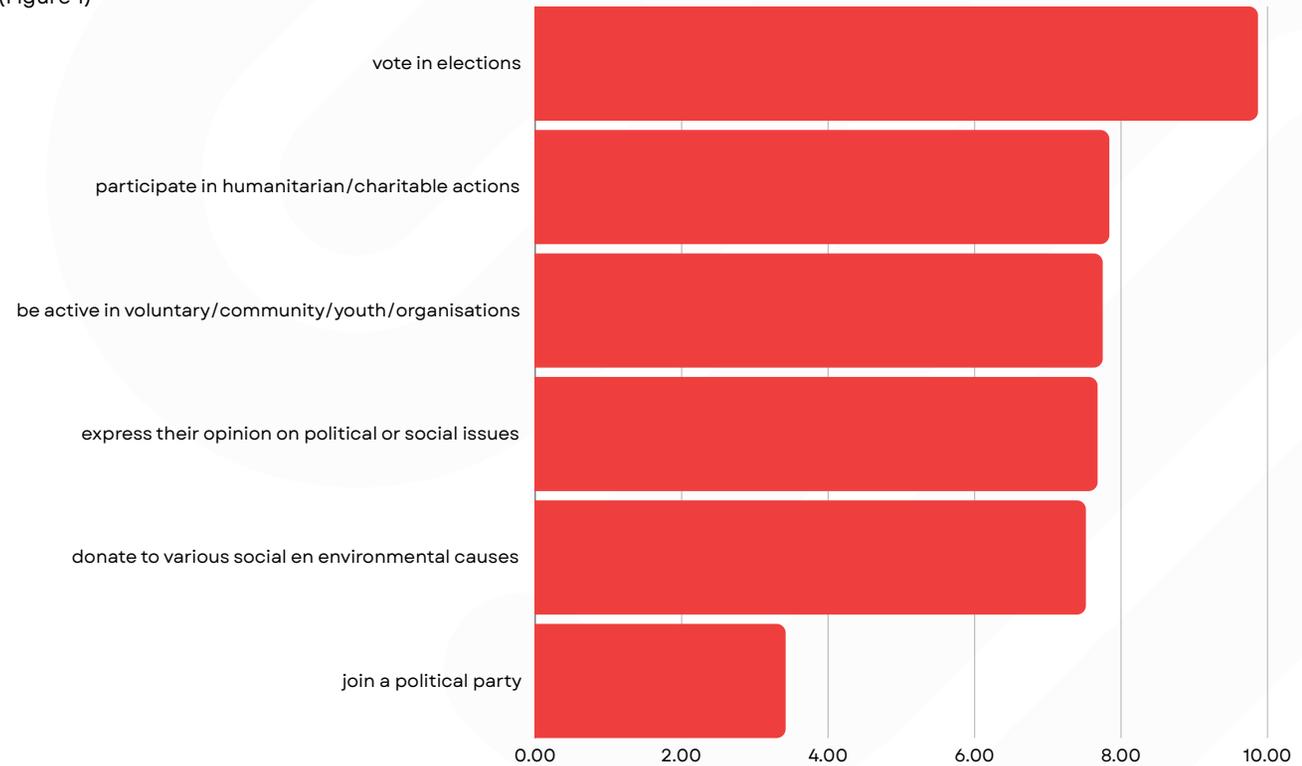
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Type of activities in which young people participate

The young people who responded to our study consider participation in the electoral process to be extremely important for being good citizens. Additionally, they attach high importance to expressing opinions on social or political issues, actively participating in volunteer groups/ community groups, or youth organizations, participating in humanitarian/charitable actions (through voluntary work), and donating to various social or environmental causes. However, belonging to a political party is considered much less important. Therefore, young people seem to believe that direct involvement in politics is not crucial for being a good citizen, unlike other forms of social and civic engagement (Figure 1)



The information gathered during the focus group also supports the idea that involvement in various civic initiatives, NGO activities, as well as interactions with decision-makers are characteristics that define a good citizen. Even though decision-making participation is not considered the most important, it was mentioned by the young participants in the discussion, referring to the importance of establishing connections, relationships with decision-makers, who should consider the opinions of young people.

“Involvement in causes you believe in for your city/country, NGOs, volunteering for the environment, education, youth, raising awareness of societal issues (briefly).”

(Focus group participant)

“Active involvement in society through initiatives aimed at community development. For me, being a good citizen means collaborating and engaging with decision-makers to identify the best solutions for addressing the issues facing the community”

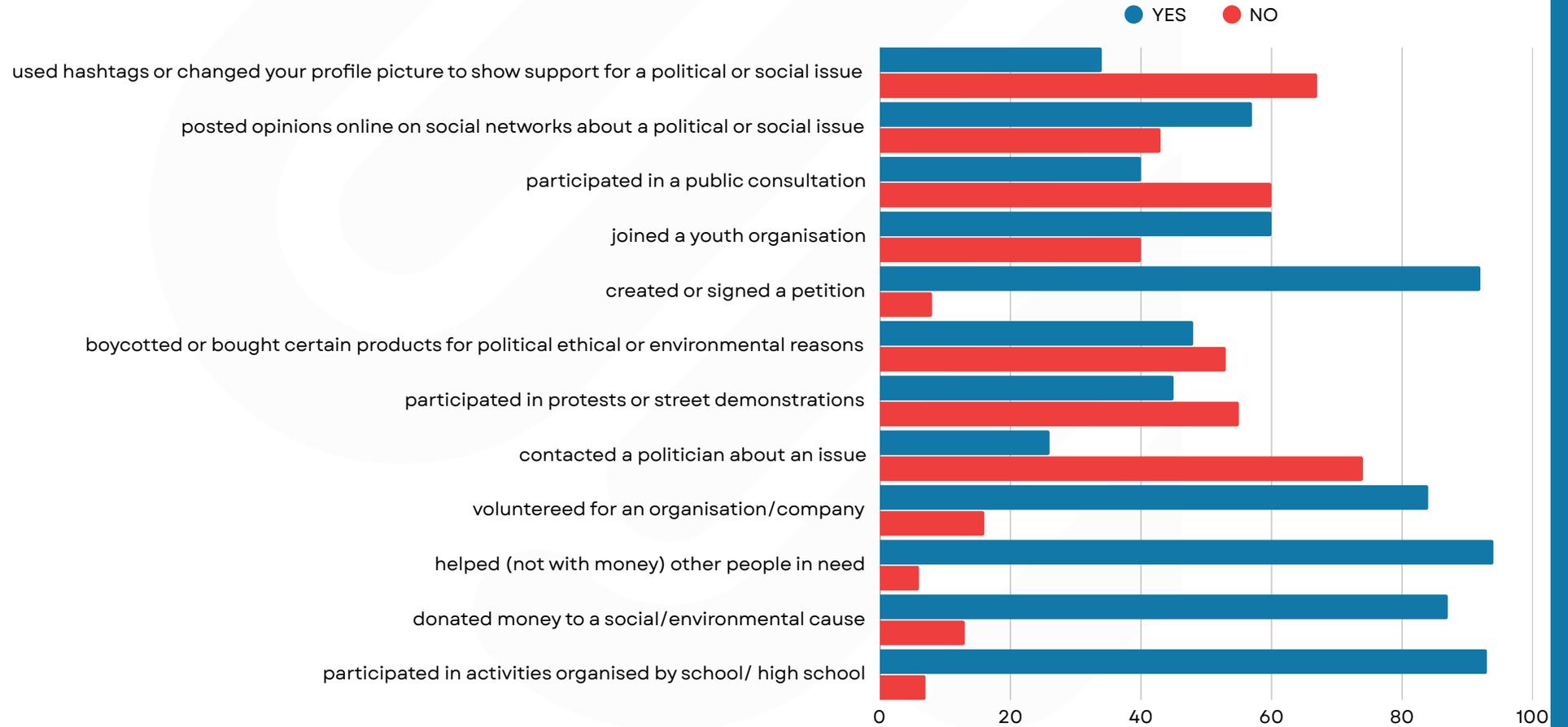
(Focus group participant)

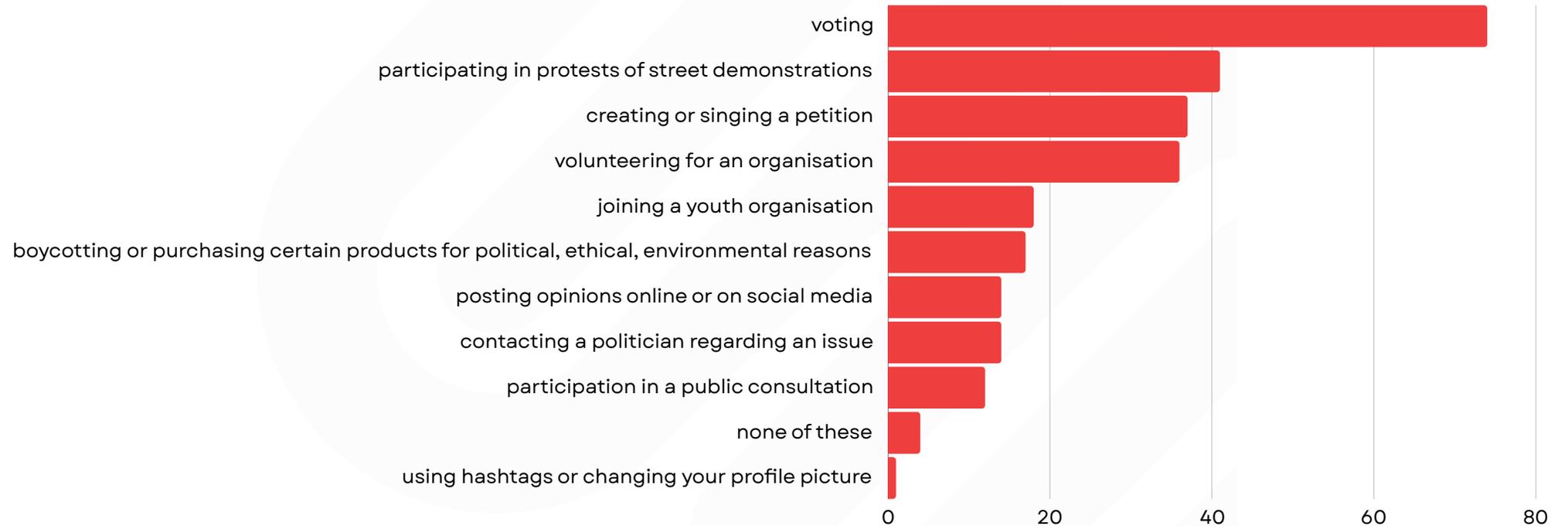
“Both the actively involved and the passive ones who respect the community and its guidelines. Those who do not violate the rights and freedoms of others, those who respect the community they are in in every possible way, with both written and unwritten rules, but also get involved if something is not working and change is needed.”

(Focus group participant)

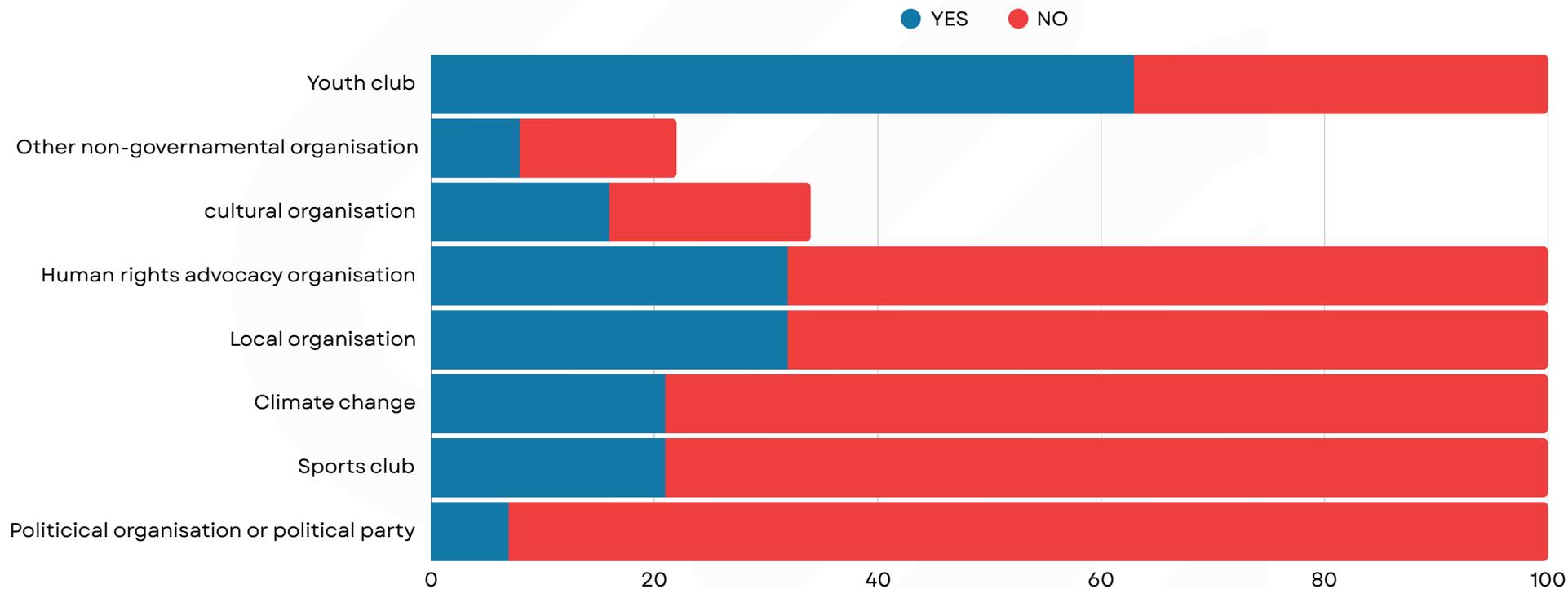
The data obtained from the questionnaire survey indicates that a significant percentage of respondents have participated in various activities. The highest proportions of young people who participated were recorded in activities organized by school/high school (93%), assisting (non-monetarily) other people in need (94%), and creating or signing a petition (92%). Also, donating money for certain social or environmental causes gathers a high number of positive responses, with 87% of respondents mentioning that they have done this at some point.

Involvement in organizations, previously recognized by young people as an important aspect of being a good citizen, shows fairly high values of participation, with 60% of respondents stating that they have joined a youth organization and 84% indicating that they have volunteered for an organization/company (Figure 2).





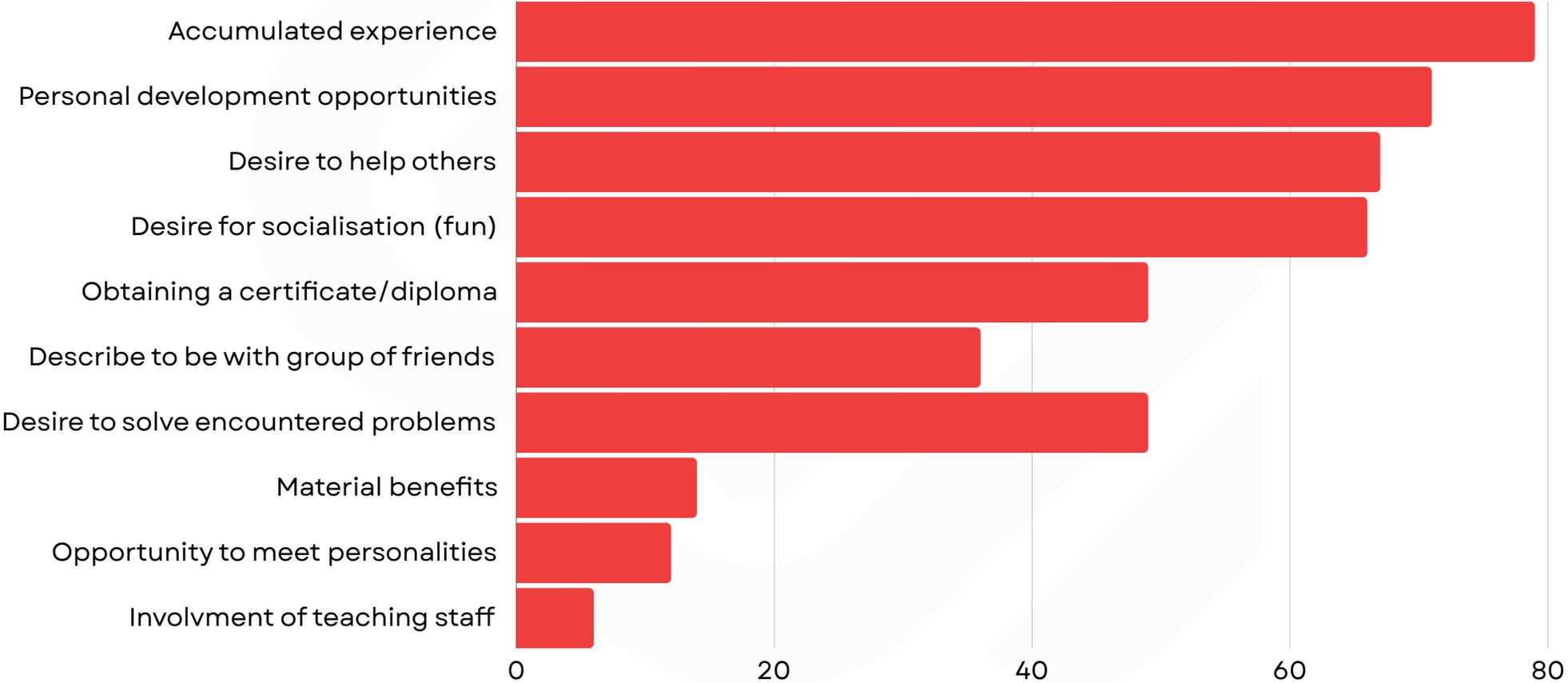
On the opposite end, a significant percentage of young people have not contacted a politician about an issue (74%), have not participated in a public consultation (60%), and have not participated in protests or street demonstrations (55%). Just under half of the respondents, state that they have boycotted or purchased certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons (48%). Although slightly over half of the young people (57%) declare that they have posted opinions online or on social media regarding a political or social issue, the percentage of those who have used hashtags or changed their profile picture to show support for a political or social issue is lower (34%). The lower values recorded for these types of participation are also due to perceived reduced effectiveness. Thus, only 14% of young people who participated in our study consider posting political opinions online or on social media to be an effective way to be heard by decision-makers. Also, the proportion of those who consider the use of hashtags or changing the profile picture to be effective for this purpose is only 1% (Figure 3)



At the top of the list of most effective actions to capture the attention of decision-makers, the vast majority of respondents place voting (74%), followed at a considerable distance by participating in protests or street demonstrations (41%) and creating or signing petitions (37%). An important aspect of being a good citizen, participation in organisations encompasses a wide range of organisations that the young people who completed our questionnaire are involved in. Thus, in the past year, most of the young people participated in youth organisations (63%). The youth clubs also include student and pupil organisations, in which many young people are members or participate in activities. Additionally, young people participated in activities of cultural organisations (40%), human rights advocacy organisations (32%), local organisations dedicated to improving community life (32%), and sports clubs (21%). Political organisations received the fewest responses, with only 7% of respondents stating that they had participated in activities of such organisations in the past year (Figure 4), which can be attributed to the low level of trust in public institutions and politicians.

Factors influencing youth participation At the top of the list of main reasons why young people participate in community activities, our respondents place accumulated experience (79%) and opportunities for personal development (71%).

The desire to help others ranks only third, mentioned by 67% of the young participants in the study. The desire for socializing (fun) is also an important aspect, mentioned by 66% of respondents (Figure 5).



Young people's participation is often motivated by self-interest (depending on the rewards/benefits received) or group oriented (participation under peer pressure or the need for group belonging). This is confirmed by the young participants in the focus group who stated that the benefit received is very important to incentivize youth participation.

"I believe there should be an interest, even if not a financial one. When I started getting involved, my classmates also joined the AEC because they had an example. In our generation, you didn't really see the opportunity to get involved, so there wasn't an impulse to engage."

(Focus group participant)

"Young people don't get involved in volunteering activities because most of them want something in return. When I was a student, in response to the question 'do you want to be part of the AEC?' the answer was 'What's in it for me?'"

(Focus group participant)

The information obtained in the focus group indicates that many of the young people who wish to study abroad are interested in participating in various community-level initiatives, as this is highly valued by universities outside Romania. As a result, they need various documents to prove this involvement, which they can later present when submitting their application files.

“When I was in high school, my classmates who wanted to study abroad got involved for their applications. The rest of us, since we didn't want to study abroad, felt we didn't need to get involved; there was a motivational link between these two things.”

(Focus group participant)

“The need for recognition of volunteer activities is extremely important for young people, even outside the educational context of studies abroad. Thus, recognizing youth involvement can be achieved both by offering rewards/facilities at the end of the events they participate in, as well as publicly, through posts by beneficiary organizations on social media. “Providing recognition and rewards is the first step. If they attend an environmental event, and then have a relaxing activity, e.g. pizza or group games, it encourages young people to attend such activities again.”

(Focus group participant)

“It's important to have both offline and online recognition. I believe that if the event host would name each person in turn, thank them, it would mean a lot to them. And online, if possible, NGOs could add pictures to their story, tag, etc. (with the volunteers).”

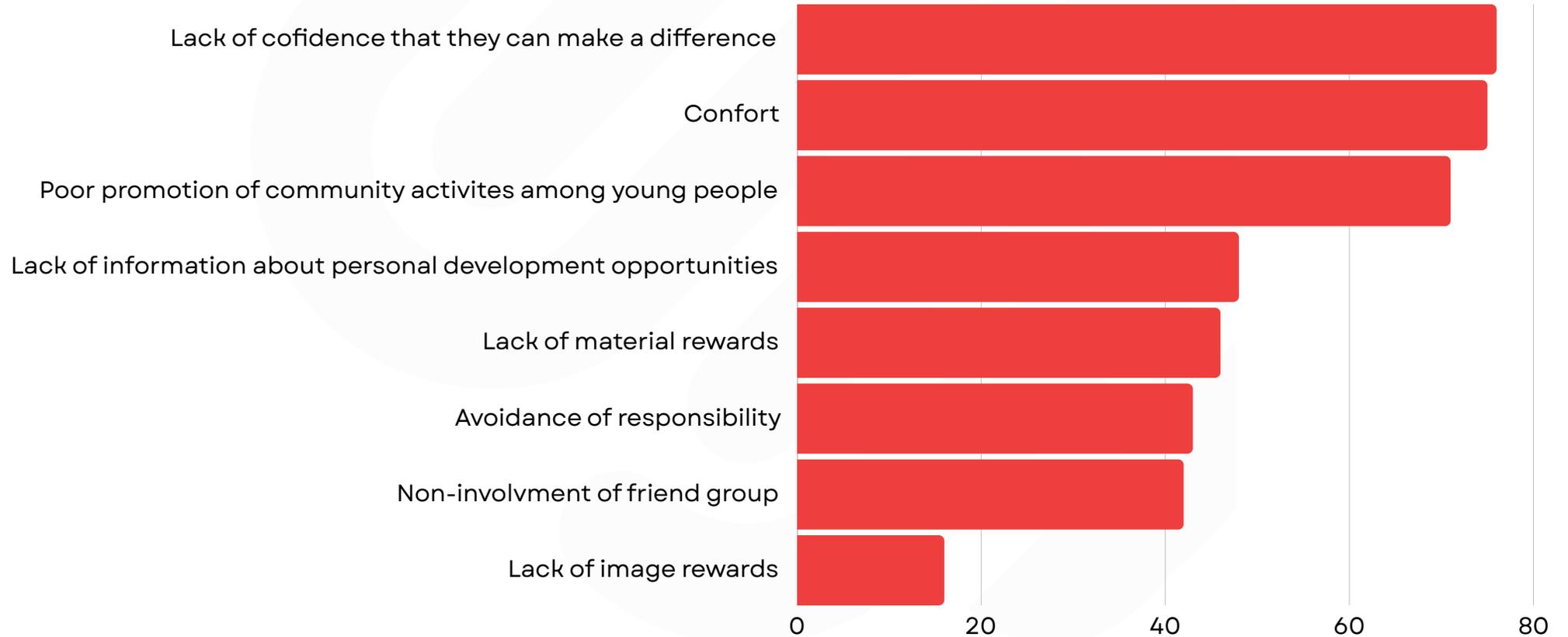
(Focus group participant)

“I would focus heavily on providing facilities. For example, after completing a volunteering program, they could receive tickets to a theater/movie .”

(Focus group participant)

Analysing the other side of the issue, namely the reasons why young people do not participate in community activities, we observe that approximately three-quarters of our respondents place the lack of confidence that they can make a difference (76%), convenience (75%), and poor promotion of community activities (71%) in the top spots. The latter is complemented by lack of necessary information on how young people could get involved, mentioned by 46% of respondents.

The opportunities for personal development valued by young people, as indicated in the preceding question, are brought up again, and 48% of respondents classify their absence as an important reason for young people's non-participation. Avoidance of responsibility and lack of material rewards are also mentioned, along with non-involvement of the friend group and lack of image rewards (Figure 6)



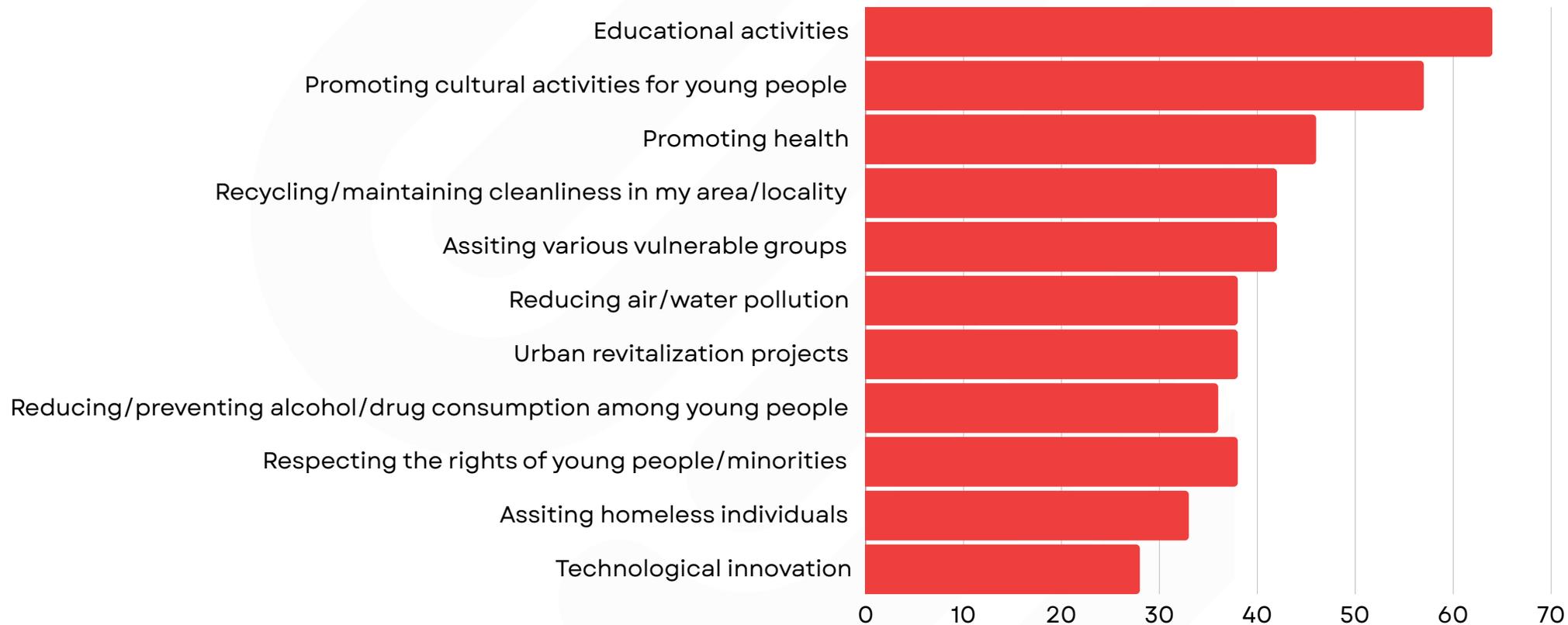
“The main reasons for young people's non-participation in community life and decision-making are linked to fear/insecurity, inability to identify benefits, and lack of knowledge of activities they can engage in. In the case of participation in decision-making, the young participants in the focus group mentioned lack of support from family or high school teachers among the reasons for non-involvement.

“Fear, shame, fear of what their peers will say, that they will laugh at them. Some were not allowed by their parents. Many believe they won't change anything anyway. Some didn't want to waste time, they wanted to get a job to make money. Some topics were too controversial, teachers would scrutinize you, you'd miss school.”

(Focus group participant)

Areas for youth involvement Regarding the main areas in which the young respondents would like to get involved in their community, the data shows that the most attractive are educational activities, mentioned by 64% of respondents, and the promotion of cultural activities for young people, selected by 57% of them. On the opposite end, the areas that gathered the lowest number of responses are technological innovation (28%) and helping the homeless (33%) (Figure 7)







Education is the area in which many of the respondents are active beneficiaries (pupils, students), and therefore the one in which they can most easily get involved.

Health, environment, and social protection are also familiar areas for respondents, most probably based on their experience as volunteers in organisations operating within these domains, especially in Bucharest.

The main reasons that drive our respondents to engage in the aforementioned areas are the desire to make a positive change in society, the community they live in, and the desire to help. These are followed by meeting new people, interacting with individuals who share the same values, and gaining experience.

A smaller number of young people mention personal development and professional opportunities, and an even smaller number mention personal satisfaction.

Conclusions

The youth's civic involvement is relatively high when considering the activities organized by schools or high schools (93%), assisting (non-monetarily) other people in need (94%), creating, or signing petitions (92%), donating money for certain social or environmental causes (87%), or volunteering for various organizations (84%).

High importance is attached by respondents to various forms of civic engagement, such as expressing opinions on social or political issues, actively participating in volunteer groups or community organizations, participating in humanitarian or charitable actions through voluntary work, and donating to various social or environmental causes.

Although participation in the electoral process is considered extremely important by 74% of respondents, involvement in political party activities is very low among young people, most likely due to low trust in public institutions and politicians. Also, involvement in the decision-making process is low among young people, with only 26% contacting a politician about an issue, 40% participating in a public consultation, and 45% participating in protests or street demonstrations.

The main reasons for young people's civic engagement are the need to accumulate experience (79%), opportunities for personal development (71%), the desire to help others (67%), socializing (fun) (66%), and obtaining a diploma or certificate (61%). Additionally, factors such as the desire to solve encountered problems and gain recognition are important for almost half of the respondents. At the same time, young people's participation is often motivated by self-interest (depending on the rewards or benefits received) or group-oriented (participation under peer pressure or the need for group belonging). Civic engagement of youth is an important admission criterion for Western universities, which mobilizes young people to be involved in civic activities as volunteers or members of non-governmental organizations.

Factors that hinder youth participation in community activities include the lack of confidence that they can make a difference, convenience, poor promotion of community activities, lack of necessary information on how they could get involved, and limited opportunities for personal development

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