

## Multiple Exclusions: Civic and Political Disengagement of Vulnerable Youth in the European Union

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# MULTIPLE EXCLUSIONS: CIVIC AND POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT OF VULNERABLE YOUTH IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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**Abstract.** *Declining levels of youth participation in conventional politics raise concerns about the future of representative democracies. Based on statistical analyses of public opinion survey data, this paper examines youth civic and political disengagement as symptoms of social exclusion. Our findings point out that youth are a heterogeneous group and vulnerable young people living in the European Union face the risk of multiple exclusions that mutually reinforce each other: from the labor market, from education and from the democratic life of their societies. Thus, youth who are neither in education, nor in employment or training (NEET) tend to be the most politically marginalized group of young people in European democracies. Acknowledging the interplay between various dimensions of youth social exclusion provides valuable theoretical, methodological and policy insights for reducing youth marginalization and breaking the vicious circle that perpetuates it.*

**Keywords:** social exclusion, young people, NEET, education, employment, political participation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of studies show that the overall decline of electoral participation across Europe mainly concentrates among the youth (Sloam 2014, Ekström and Sveningsson 2019, Grasso 2018, Briggs 2017). This raises concerns about the future of representative democracies. A common interpretation of the low levels of electoral turnout among young voters is that they are apathetic and part of a generation which does not care about political issues (Cammaerts et al. 2014). This perspective is largely supported by generational theories arguing that during their formative years, young people

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will face socio-economic and political conditions different enough from those faced by the previous generation (Woodman 2016) and these conditions are likely to influence young people's feelings and attitudes towards politics across their life course. Similarly, the life-cycle perspectives contend that young people are at a life stage in which they are not well established in society, they are more mobile and have other priorities than politics, such as continuing education, finding a job or establishing a family, and therefore they have lower stakes in participating in the political process (Garcia-Albacete 2014, Jaime-Castillo 2008). Both generational and life-cycle theories offer a rather fragmented and incomplete perspective on youth political disengagement. If generational approaches are correct then youth disengagement is likely to remain a persistent feature of the current generation of young people. On the other hand, the life-cycle perspective presumes that once young people will become adults, they will get more engaged into politics simply because they will enter a different stage in their life course. Both these approaches are grounded on the assumption that, at a certain time period, youth represents a rather homogeneous category of people. In this paper, we question this assumption and suggest an alternative perspective.

Based on the observation that today's young people are a highly heterogeneous group, at least in terms of identities, educational and socio-economic backgrounds, we ask if civic and political disengagement evenly affects various categories of youth. In order to answer this question, we investigate whether levels of disengagement are linked to various forms of social exclusion that especially effect the young people. More specifically, using statistical analyses of public opinion survey data, we compare levels of civic and political disengagement between different categories of youth, defined according to their educational and employment status. In contrasting different groups of young people, we follow Cammaerts et al. (2016, 174) who contend that the most excluded youth are those who are neither in employment, nor in education or training, named in the literature as NEET. In scholarly and policy papers the term NEET is frequently associated in with vulnerable, marginalized, disadvantaged or excluded youth, although there is no perfect overlapping between these notions (Thompson 2011, Pouw and Hodgkinson 2016). Throughout this paper, we use these terms interchangeably to refer to the young NEETs as a distinct subgroup of the larger category of "excluded" youth. Thus, *the main goal of this paper is to examine to what extent youth experiencing social and economic disadvantage tend to also be the most politically marginalized group of young people in their society.*

Social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon that affects both individuals' quality of life, as well as the equity and cohesion of society as a whole (Levitas et al. 2007). Generally, social exclusion is viewed as a process involving the lack and/or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, as well as the inability of vulnerable groups of persons to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas (Levitas et al. 2007, 25). Youth are particularly affected by social exclusion (Thompson 2011, Augsburg et al. 2017) and this hinders their successful transition to adulthood (Kieselbach et al. 2013). Eurostat reports estimate that around one out of three young persons aged between 18 and 24 years face the risk of poverty or social exclusion in the European Union (Eurostat 2017). While a large body of research provides evidence about the economic and social deprivation of young people (Weil, Wildemeersch, and Percy-Smith 2016, Littlewood 2017, Saunders et al. 2018), particularly during the 2008-2009 economic crisis (Tanveer Choudhry, Marelli, and Signorelli 2012, Scarpetta, Sonnet, and Manfredi 2010), the civic and political dimensions of youth marginalization are generally studied separately from other dimensions of youth social exclusion (Barrett and Pachi

2019). This fragmented approach limits our understanding of the complex interplay between various factors that hinder the social integration of youth. Thus, examining if young people who are experiencing social and economic disadvantage tend to also be the most politically disengaged in society will provide evidence about the multiple exclusions affecting the youth and will thus contribute to the larger academic and policy literature on the main pathways of social and political marginalization among young Europeans.

Beside this first section that serves as an introduction, the rest of this chapter has four parts. Section 2 of the paper conceptualizes youth civic and political disengagement as forms of social exclusion. It also acknowledges the interplay of various dimensions of social exclusion that drive and reinforce each other, focusing particularly on the interconnections between the inability to access education and employment and youth civic and political disengagement. Section 3 examines how the interplay between various forms of exclusion to which young persons are particularly exposed, hinders their successful transition to adulthood. The section will focus on young people who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) and will point out their financial difficulties, sense of socio-economic exclusion and satisfaction with life. Section 4 investigates to what extent young people experiencing social and economic disadvantage tend to also be the most politically marginalized category of youth in their societies. To do so, we analyze the link between young people's education and occupational status and a plethora of forms of civic and political engagement. The concluding section of this paper highlights the main findings and discusses their methodological, theoretical, public policy and normative implications.

## 2. CONCEPTUALIZING YOUTH CIVIC AND POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT AS FORMS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional and dynamic concept (Barnes 2019, Apăteanu and Tătar 2017). Overall, it refers both to “a state of exclusion characterized by the inability of individuals or groups to fully participate in the economic, social, cultural or political life as well as to the processes leading and perpetuating such a state” (United Nations 2016, 18). In this paper we argue that conceptualizing the lack of young citizens' participation in the political processes and in civic life as dimensions of the overall notion of social exclusion is a fruitful analytical strategy that could increase our understanding of the structural and psychological factors that hinder inclusive and equal democratic participation (Tătar 2016). Political and civic participation is a “major part of social life and crucial to promoting inclusion” (United Nations 2016, 5), for several reasons. First, citizens who participate in various aspects of social and political life can make their voice heard in the political arena and their interests have better chances of being represented in the political process, compared to those that do not or cannot participate (Tătar 2015b). On the other hand, “individuals and groups who are excluded from these processes have limited voice or power to affect the attitudes, norms, institutions and policies that drive social exclusion in the first place” (United Nations 2016, 5). Second, participation in political processes drives networks of relationships on which social capital is built and the potential for collective action is generated. On its turn, social capital might foster better access to employment, income, health and education (Durlauf and Fafchamps 2005), all of which contribute to youth social inclusion. Thus, existing research suggests that political disengagement and other dimensions of social exclusion consolidate and drive each other (The Electoral Commission 2005, 1).

Acknowledging the interplay between various dimensions of social exclusion provides valuable policy insights for reducing youth marginalization and breaking the

vicious circle that perpetuates it. Based on lessons drawn from youth work, an EACEA (2013) report notes that “social exclusion produces deep and long-term damage to the living conditions, social and economic participation, emotional life, and health status of young people. It also contributes to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. In turn, insecurity in living standards, political and social isolation, feelings of estrangement and unhealthy lifestyles aggravate pre-existing conditions of social exclusion. This results in a vicious circle where socially excluded young people are in even more danger of suffering from additional material deprivation, social and emotional marginalization, and health issues, which in turn expose them to more serious risks of exclusion” (EACEA 2013, 4). Thus, disadvantages on these dimensions of social exclusion tend to reinforce one another. For instance, the UN 2016 report on inclusive development highlights that lower levels of healthcare and education go hand in hand with higher levels of poverty and unemployment, and often also with less voice in political and civic life. Similarly, the employment situation affects not only a person’s income but also his or her participation in social and political life. Thus, in terms of policy outcomes, progress in one domain alone will not be sufficient to end social exclusion (United Nations 2016, 99).

Young persons are prone to be affected by unemployment and various forms of exclusion from the educational system (Briggs 2017). Early school leaving and barriers to accessing affordable, quality education and training are common occurrences in the life trajectories of socially excluded young people, which affect their ability to secure long-term employment and comfortable living conditions (EACEA 2013, 12). Exclusions from the labor market and education are key forms of youth social exclusion that are interconnected to financial precarity, feelings of exclusion and lower life satisfaction. Being not in employment, education or training (NEET) for an extended period of time leads to the long-term social and political marginalization of young people, strengthening the feeling of dependence and powerlessness (EACEA 2013, 14) both in the private and public spheres of life.

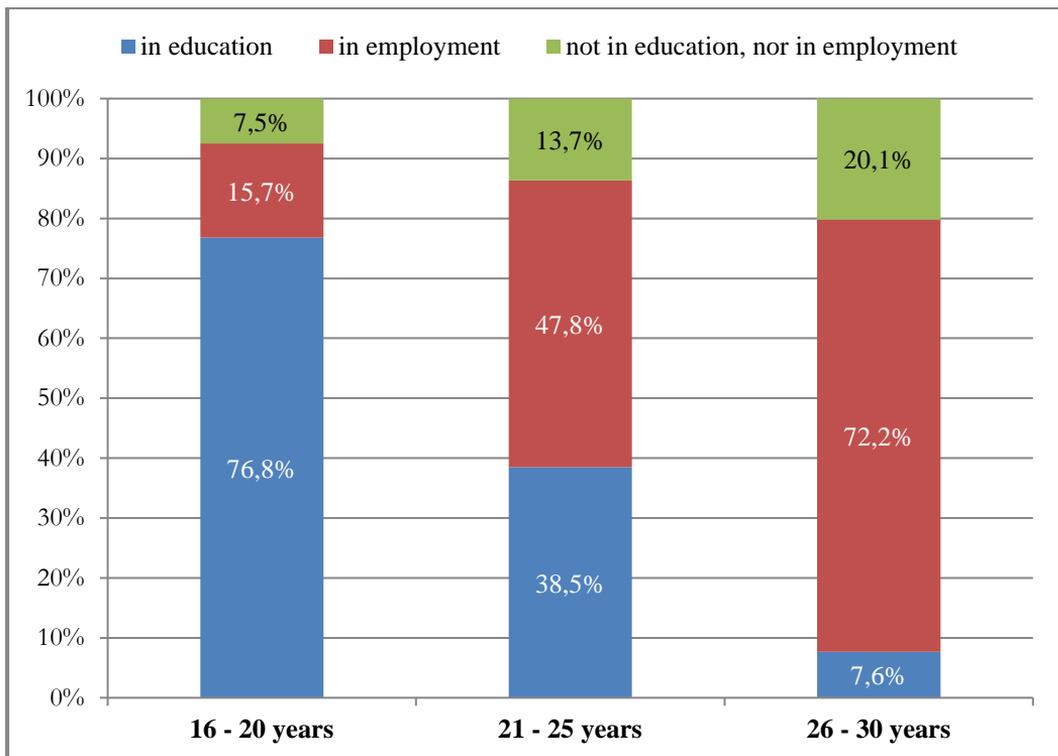
Following Barrett and Pachi (2019, 3) we use the term political engagement to refer to the engagement of an individual with political institutions, processes and decision-making. By contrast, the term civic engagement is used to refer to the engagement of an individual with the concerns, interests and common good of a community. As suggested by Barret and Pachi, the term community is understood in a broad sense as any kind of cultural or social group which is salient to an individual and which therefore provides a site for that individual’s civic action (Barrett and Pachi 2019, 3). Thus, we contend that young people are politically and civically disengaged if they do not know, value or participate in the community and democratic life. While engagement usually entails participatory behaviour, the literature on youth political engagement pinpoints that young persons can be psychologically or affectively engaged without being behaviorally engaged. For instance, Barret and Pachi (2019, 3) argue that lack of overt political or civic action cannot necessarily be interpreted as a sign of political or civic disengagement. One of the most common indicators of youth psychological engagement are political interest (Soler-i-Martí 2015) and political efficacy. Political interest is a key factor associated both with conventional (voting in elections, election campaigning, party membership, contacting politicians etc.) and non-conventional (attending demonstrations, protests, signing petitions, writing political blogs, etc.) forms of political participation (Tătar 2016, 2015a, b, 2011a, b). We use the term political efficacy to refer to the self-perceive capacity of an individual to understand and influence political decisions which is an essential aspect of any collective attempts to bring about change in society.

In this paper, we operationalize youth civic and political engagement starting from various normative conceptions of democracy (Tătar 2011a, Cammaerts et al. 2016). Thus we examine several forms of youth engagement: participation in electoral democracy (voting in elections and membership in political parties); participation as attempts to influence decision-making in representative democracy (political efficacy and voice, signing petitions); cognitive engagement in deliberative politics as a way of getting information and forming opinions on political issues (political interest, participation in debates); engagement in the civic structures which promote participatory democracy (participation in youth organizations and other NGOs, participation in organized volunteer activities). One of the prominent explanations of political participation is offered by the “civic voluntarism model” developed by Sidney Verba and his colleagues (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Adapting their model to youth disengagement we can argue that young people are not politically active mainly because: *they can't*, that is they don't have the means or resources necessary for engagement such as education, employment, time, money and civic skills (organizational, communication and leadership skills); *they don't want to*, that is they lack *motivation* such as interest in politics, knowledge about politics and political efficacy; *nobody asked*, that is they are not exposed to *recruitment opportunities* offered by civic and political organizations and social networks. In this paper, we are particularly interested to what extent the lack of access to resources, such as education or employment, impedes the civic and political engagement of vulnerable youth in the European Union. Thus, in the next two sections we examine how the interplay between various forms of exclusion hinders young people's successful transition to adulthood and their participation in society and politics.

### 3. TRAJECTORIES OF VULNERABLE YOUTH IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

This section explores the patterns and magnitude of youth marginalization in the European Union, by focusing on the most excluded young people, namely those who are neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEET). Scholars generally analyze youth as a life stage marked by a transition between childhood and adulthood (Tanner and Arnett 2016, Pouw and Hodgkinson 2016, Ruspini 2016, Halfon et al. 2018). Nevertheless, conceptions of what youth means generally differ from one cultural context to another and may also differ from one generation to another. For instance, Cammaerts et al. (2013) point out that in some countries young people are dependent on their parents for much longer than elsewhere and this tendency is exacerbated in times of crisis. Nevertheless, studies concerned with youth point out that during this life phase several social markers of childhood turn into adulthood markers (Pouw and Hodgkinson 2016). For example, scholars often view the transition from living as a dependent family member to living independently, or the transition from education to professional training and employment as illustrating the processes which occur during youth (Pouw and Hodgkinson 2016). Yet, transitions to adulthood are not necessarily linear and smooth for all individuals. Consequently, understanding youth as a transition life stage might be problematic since young people represent a diverse and highly heterogeneous group in society with a complex variety of identities and socio-economic as well as educational backgrounds (Cammaerts et al. 2013). Moreover, “the transition from childhood to early adulthood can prove a highly variable, non-linear, fragmented and sometimes extended process, with the transition to independent living in some contexts not taking place until 30 or even 35 years of age” (Barrett and Pachi 2019, 2). For the purpose of this study, most of the data analyses presented in the next sections focus on young persons aged between 16 and 30.

Figure 1 illustrates that between 16 and 30 years of age an important shift occurs from the world of education to the world of employment<sup>1</sup>, for most European young people. While in the 16-20 age group more than three quarters were in education, most of those aged 26-30 were in employment<sup>2</sup>. In-between, young people aged 21-25 were more balanced in terms of distribution between education and employment. A third category comprises the young people who are neither in employment nor in education. Their proportion increases considerably with age: from 7.5% for the age group 16-20 in 2016, to 13.7% in the age group 21-25, and reaches more than 1 person in 5, for those aged 26-30 (20.1%).



**Fig. 1. Education and employment patterns of young people in Europe, by five-year age groups, 2016<sup>3</sup>**

Source: Authors' elaboration based on *Eurobarometer 85.1OVR: European Youth in 2016*. All 28 member states of EU were included

<sup>1</sup> The association between age groups and occupational status of youth is proven statistically significant by a Chi Square test of association [ $\chi^2(4) = 3536.78, p < 0.001, N = 10295$  valid cases] and the effect size coefficient, Cramer's V = 0.414, indicates a strong association between the two variables.

<sup>2</sup> A similar pattern is also revealed by Eurostat (2016) data.

<sup>3</sup> Data in this figure is based on variables D11r (age recoded in 3 categories) and D15a (occupation) from the original Eurobarometer dataset. Variable D15a was recoded into a new variable having 3 categories (1=in education, 2=in employment, 3=not in education, nor in employment). The original questionnaire did not allow multiple answers for respondents' occupation, therefore we were unable to highlight individuals who were both in education and employment. For more information on data source please see the Eurobarometer 85.1OVR (April 2016) commissioned by the European Commission and European Parliament (2016), [doi:10.4232/1.12642](https://doi.org/10.4232/1.12642), last accessed on 20 August 2017.

Young people who are neither in employment nor in education or training have a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion, than other categories of youth. Table 1 illustrates that European NEETs have indeed a much more precarious financial situation, compared to other categories of young persons. Almost one quarter of NEETs (24.4%) have difficulties most of the time to pay their bills at the end of the month, and additionally 39% of them occasionally have such difficulties. The percentages of those who frequently have difficulties to pay their bills are much lower among those who are in education (6%) or those who are in employment (6.4%). In addition, various studies show that people who are worried about their financial situation have less working memory available to them, which subsequently negatively affects their work performance (Meuris and Leana 2017).

**Table 1: Financial precarity among European youth<sup>4</sup>**

During the last twelve months, would you say you had difficulties to pay your bills at the end of the month...?	Young persons aged 16-30			Total
	in education	in employment	neither in education, nor employment	
<i>Most of the time</i>	6.0%	6.4%	24.4%	8.8%
<i>Occasionally</i>	22.3%	28.8%	39.0%	27.7%
<i>Almost never/never</i>	64.2%	63.3%	34.5%	59.6%
<i>Refusal (SPONT.)</i>	7.6%	1.4%	2.1%	3.9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

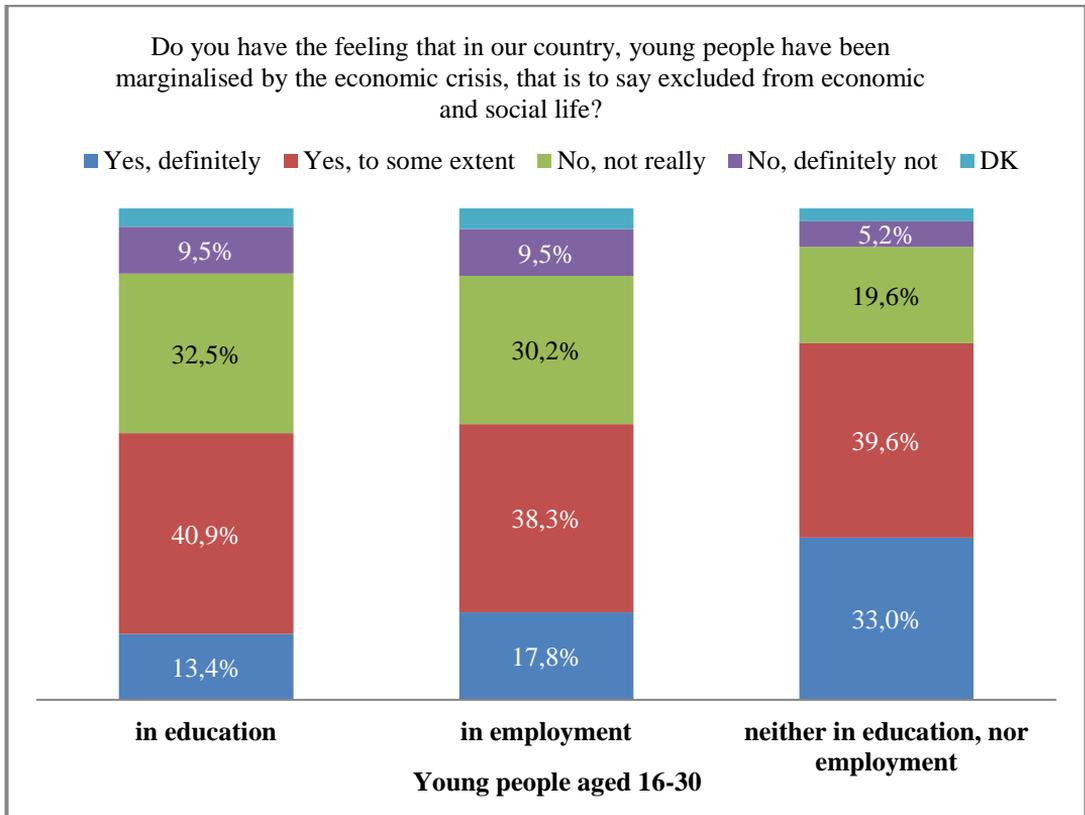
Source: Authors' elaboration based on *Eurobarometer 85.1OVR: European Youth in 2016*. Percentages are shown on columns. All 28 EU member states were included.

At EU level, almost 5 million young persons aged 20-24 were in 2015 neither in employment nor in education or training (Eurostat 2016, 2). While the overall share of NEETs remained relatively constant in Europe between 2006 and 2015, there are divergent developments in this regard between EU Member States. According to Eurostat (2016, 2) data, in 10 Member States the proportion of NEETs aged 20-24 decreased between 2006 and 2015, while in other eighteen countries the proportion of NEETS has increased significantly between 2006 and 2015, notably in Italy (from 21.6% to 31.1%, or +9.5 percentage points-pp), Greece (+9.3 pp), Spain (+9.0 pp), Cyprus (+8.5 pp), Ireland (+7.8 pp), Croatia (+5.4 pp), Romania (+5.2 pp). With 24.1% NEETs in the age group 20-24, Romania ranked among the EU Member States with the highest percentages of vulnerable youth in 2015. Compared to Romania, higher proportions of NEETs (aged 20-24) were recorded in only 3 Member States: Italy (31.1%), Greece (26.1%) and Spain (22.2%).

Young people neither in employment, nor in education often feel excluded from social and economic life. Figure 2 illustrates the significant link between perceptions of social exclusion and the occupational status of young people. For instance, almost three quarters (72.6%) of those who are neither in employment, nor in education (NEETs) feel that young people in their country have been marginalized during the economic crisis:

<sup>4</sup> The association between financial difficulties and occupational status of youth is proven statistically significant by a Chi Square test of association [ $\chi^2(6) = 987.80, p < 0.001, N = 10293$  valid cases] and the effect size coefficient, Cramer's V = 0.219, indicates a moderate level association between the two variables.

33% believe that youth have been definitely affected and 39.6 believe they were affected to some extent. Perceptions of youth social and economic exclusion are less widespread among other groups of young people. For example, only 13.4% of young people in education, and 17.8% of those in employment believe that youth in their country have been definitely marginalized by the crisis. Overall, slightly more than half of those who are in education (54.3%) or in employment (55.1%) believe that young people in their country have been at least to some extent marginalized during the economic crisis.



**Fig. 2. Marginalization of youth during the economic crisis**

Source: Authors' elaboration based on *Eurobarometer 85.1OVR: European Youth in 2016*. Percentages up to 100% are responses with "Don't Know"/DK. All 28 members states of EU were included.

Social exclusion is often indicated by subjective measures that are based on perceived states or self-assessed evaluations of individuals or groups (Labonté, Hadi, and Kauffmann 2011, DeWall 2013). Satisfaction with life is such a subjective measure that relates to youth occupational status<sup>5</sup> (see Table 2). While overall young people are quite satisfied with their life, there are significant differences between those who are in education or employment, on the one hand and those who are neither in education nor employment or training (NEETs), on the other hand. For instance, only 7.3% of those who

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between the occupational status of youth and their life satisfaction is proven statistically significant by a Chi Square test of association [ $\chi^2(8) = 965.60, p < 0.001, N = 10295$  valid cases] and the effect size coefficient, Cramer's V = 0.217, indicates a medium association between the two variables.

are in education and only 10% of those who are in employment are “not very satisfied with their life”, while more than one quarter of the NEETs are “not very satisfied with their life” (26.4%). Differences are even more clear-cut when it comes to those who are “not at all satisfied” with their life: only 0.9% of those in education and 1.4% of those in employment, compared to 10.6% of those who are neither in education, nor employment. If we add the percentages of those who are “not very” and “not at all satisfied” with their life we find that more than one third of the NEETs are not satisfied with life (37%), compared to only 11.4% of those in employment and 8.2% of those in education. Previous research has demonstrated that the precarious status of NEETs undermines their self-esteem and builds resentment and disillusionment with politics and the political process (Briggs 2017). For instance, Flavin and Keane (2012) find that individuals who are less satisfied with their lives are less likely to turn out to vote and participate in the political process through other avenues. Moreover, the magnitude of the effect of life satisfaction on political engagement rivals that of education, which is a commonly used predictor of political participation (European Commission 2014). Building on these findings, in the next section we show that the most vulnerable categories of young people (i.e. the NEET) not only feel excluded from economic life and have lower degrees of life satisfaction, but they are also more likely to be excluded from various forms of social and political participation.

**Table 2: Life satisfaction and occupational status of youth in Europe**

On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?	Young people aged 16-30			Total
	in education	in employment	neither in education, nor employment	
<i>Very satisfied</i>	33.3%	26.6%	15.1%	27.6%
<i>Fairly satisfied</i>	57.8%	61.2%	47.5%	57.9%
<i>Not very satisfied</i>	7.3%	10.0%	26.4%	11.3%
<i>Not at all satisfied</i>	.9%	1.4%	10.6%	2.5%
<i>DK</i>	.6%	.7%	.5%	.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on *Eurobarometer 85.1OVR: European Youth in 2016*. Percentages on columns. All 28 EU member states were included.

#### 4. CIVIC AND POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT OF MARGINALIZED YOUTH IN THE EU

This section examines to what extent young people experiencing social and economic disadvantage tend to also be the most politically excluded group of young people in their society. Most studies focus on singular aspects of social exclusion and thus fail to reveal the multiple disadvantages that reinforce processes of exclusion (Levitas et al. 2007, 10). Using the case of European youth, in this section we illustrate how factors pertaining to resources (namely education and occupational status) are linked to levels of political and civic engagement.

Membership and participation in organizations and associations are generally viewed as a reliable variables used to assess young citizens’ engagement in civic life

(Cammaerts et al. 2016, 111). Participation in sport and leisure clubs, along with local community organizations seem to be the most popular forms of civic engagement among young people. Nevertheless, not all young people equally participate in these organizations. Exclusion from the labor market and the education system is linked with lower levels of youth civic engagement. Data presented Table 3 show that young people who are neither in education, nor in employment have significantly lower participation rates in the activities of various civil society organizations, than to those who are employed or continuing education. Compared to other categories of young persons, NEETs get involved less in the activities promoted by sports and youth clubs, cultural and community associations, organizations promoting human rights or global development as well as in the actions of any other type of organization. In fact, almost two out of three NEETs (62.9%) have not participated in any activity organized by civil society organizations during the last 12 months (see the last row in Table 3). On the other hand, only about one third of those who are both in employment and education didn't get involved in any activity of these organizations.

**Table 3: Youth civic participation in the EU**

In the last 12 months, have you participated in any activities of the following organizations?	Young people aged 15-30 <sup>6</sup>				Total aged 15-30
	Both in education and employment	In education	In employment	Neither in education, nor employment	
<i>A sports club</i>	38.6%	34.3%	28.4%	16.6%	28.8%
<i>A youth club, leisure-time club or any kind of youth organization</i>	20.0%	21.1%	13.5%	12.7%	16.4%
<i>A cultural organization</i>	11.1%	12.5%	7.9%	8.2%	9.8%
<i>A political organization or a political party</i>	7.5%	5.5%	4.1%	2.8%	4.5%
<i>A local organization aimed at improving your local community</i>	16.6%	10.6%	10.6%	9.4%	10.6%
<i>An organization active in the domain of climate change/environmental issues</i>	3.3%	2.8%	3.8%	2.3%	3.1%
<i>An organization promoting human rights or global development</i>	10.6%	5.3%	4.0%	3.6%	4.7%
<i>Any other non-governmental organization</i>	12.0%	7.6%	6.8%	6.3%	7.2%
<i>None of these</i>	34.9%	42.9%	53.7%	62.9%	50.7%

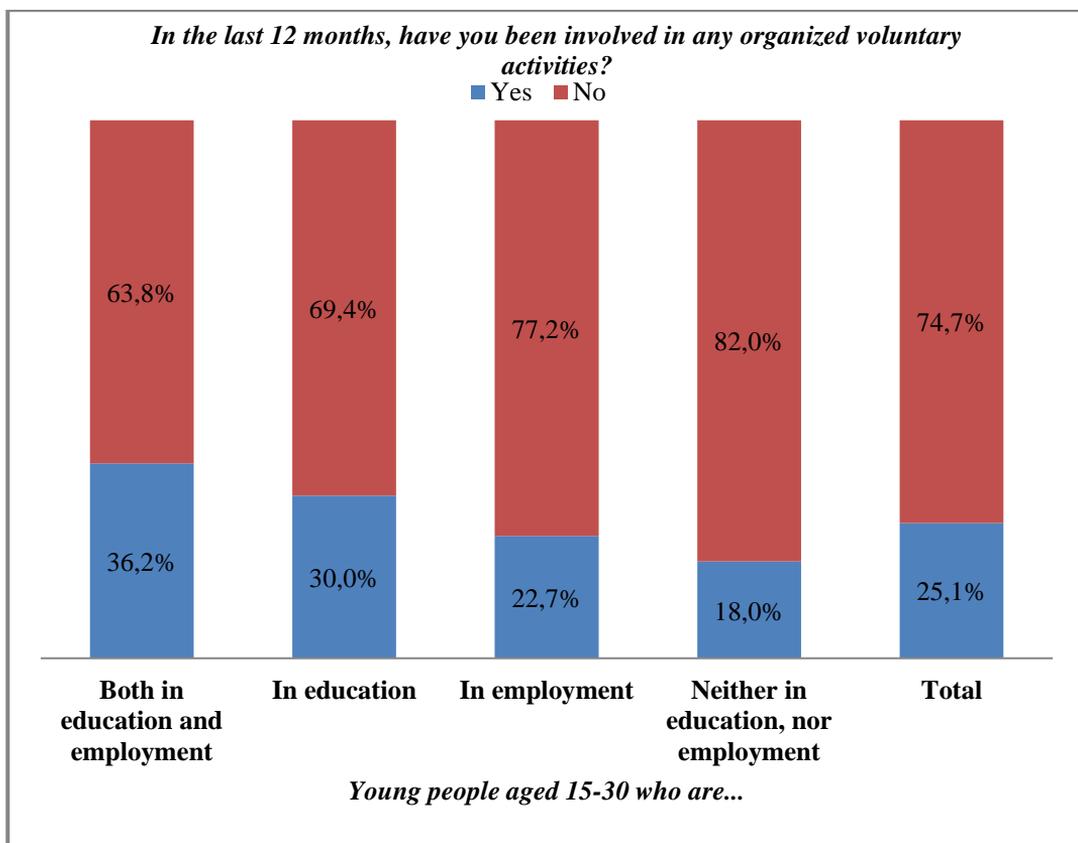
Source: Authors' elaboration based on *Flash Eurobarometer 408: European Youth*, December 2014 - January 2015 (European Commission 2015). Data<sup>7</sup> entries represent percentages within each category of young people of those who have participated in the activities of various organizations.

<sup>6</sup> A new variable measuring the occupational and educational status of youth (having 4 categories) was created based on the combination of variables D4 and D5. This new variable was added to the original dataset.

<sup>7</sup> The relationships between the occupational and educational status of youth and their participation in the activities of various organizations are proven statistically significant by a series of Chi Square tests of association [ $p < 0.01$ ,  $N = 13453$  valid cases].

All 28 EU member states were included. Examples of reading data: “During the last 12 months, 62.9% of young people who are neither in employment, nor in employment have participated in none of the activities of the organizations listed above.”

Encouraging volunteering is a key aspect of developing a civic consciousness amongst young people (Cammaerts et al. 2016, 116). Figure 3 shows that about a quarter of the 15-to-30 years old in the EU have been involved in organized voluntary activities, in the last 12 months. Nevertheless, there is a clear difference between the volunteering experience of the NEETs and other categories of youth, who engage significantly more in voluntary activities. Since the data presented in Figure 3 refers to organized voluntary activities, it might be the case that the NEETs are harder to reach by civil society organizations that offer the context for such voluntary activities. This explanation seems to be also supported by data in Table 3, which point out that the NEETs are rather disconnected from any type of social and cultural organization or community group, which could be salient to an individual and which therefore, could provide a site for civic action (Barrett and Pachi 2019, 3). Summarizing, data in Table 3 and Figure 3, reveal that the NEETs are not only excluded from the labor market and education system but they also seem to be more disengaged from civic matters, understood here as the concerns, interests and common good of a community, compared to other categories of youth.



**Figure 3: Youth participation in organized voluntary activities in Europe**

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on *Flash Eurobarometer 408: European Youth*, December 2014 - January 2015 (European Commission 2015). Note: Percentages up to 100% represent “DK/NA” answers.

Marginalized youth have lower levels not only of civic, but also of political engagement. Table 4 compares the effect of the occupational status on the interest in politics among young people (aged 15-30) and adults (aged 31-55). Regardless of age, people who are better off in terms of occupational status, are more likely to be interested in politics, than those who are in a disadvantaged position. For instance, the young NEETs tend to have lower levels of interest in politics compared to young persons who are in employment or in education. The same pattern holds for adults too: those who are unemployed are more likely to declare lower levels of political interest, compared to those who are employed or self-employed. However, the effect of occupational status on political interest seems to be bigger for adults than for young people. This difference is particularly visible in Table 4 when one examines the percentages of those who have a strong interest in politics. In the case of young persons who are strongly interested in politics, there is only a 3.6 percentage points difference between those who are in education (13%) and the those who are neither in education, nor in employment (8.4%). On the other hand, among the adults that have a strong interest in politics there is a substantial difference of 15.9 percentage points between the self-employed (27.4%) and those who are not working (11.6%). Overall, the data presented in Table 4 show that adults are more likely to be interested in politics than young people. For instance, about 51% of youth have a strong or medium political interest, while among adults the percentage of those who are strongly or moderately interested in politics is about 63%. However, the difference between youth and adults is unevenly distributed between various occupational categories. For instance, there is a substantial difference of over 14 percentage points between the strongly interested in politics self-employed adults (27.4%) and young people in education (13%). On the other hand, when it comes to expressing a high interest in politics, the difference between adults who are not working (11.6%) and young NEETs (8.4%) is of only about 3 percentage points. To sum up, the findings in Table 4 suggest that interest in politics is not merely a consequence of age, and as today's young people will age, they will not become automatically more interested in politics as life cycle effects theories would predict.

**Table 4: Political interest among youth (aged 16-30) and adults (aged 31-55) in the European Union**

Interest in politics	Young people aged 16-30				Adults aged 31-55			
	<i>In education</i>	<i>In employment</i>	<i>Neither in education, nor employment</i>	Total youth	Self-employed	Employed	Not working	Total adults
<i>Strong</i>	13.0%	12.2%	8.4%	12.0%	27.4%	16.1%	11.6%	16.5%
<i>Medium</i>	37.4%	43.6%	33.6%	39.7%	46.7%	48.6%	41.5%	47.0%
<i>Low</i>	23.8%	21.6%	20.8%	22.4%	14.3%	18.9%	18.3%	18.3%
<i>Not at all</i>	25.8%	22.7%	37.2%	25.9%	11.6%	16.3%	28.6%	18.3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on *Eurobarometer 85.1OVR: European Youth in 2016*<sup>8</sup> and the standard Eurobarometer 85.1, April 2016. Percentages are on columns. All 28 EU member states were included.

<sup>8</sup> Eurobarometer 85.1OVR consists of the respondents aged 16 to 30 years from the basic wave Eurobarometer 85.1 (ZA6693), completed with an oversample of young people of the same age

Another important psychological factor that has been linked with civic and political participation is political efficacy, namely the self-belief that one can understand and influence political decisions. Data in Table 5 measures political efficacy as the self-belief that one's voice counts in the EU and compares the results for young people and adults. Marginalized people in terms of occupational status tend to have lower levels of political efficacy and this pattern holds both for youth and adults. Thus, young NEETs tend to believe to a lesser extent that their voice counts in the EU, compared with employed or in education youth. Similarly, adults who are not working are more likely to consider that their voice does not count in the EU, compared with those who are employed or self-employed. Overall, youth are having slightly higher levels of subjective political efficacy: almost 42% of young people tend to believe that their voice counts in the EU, compared to 39% of adults.

**Table 5: Political efficacy of youth (aged 16-30) and adults (aged 31-55) in the European Union**

“My voice counts in the EU”	Young people aged 16-30				Adults aged 31-55			
	<i>In education</i>	<i>In employment</i>	<i>Neither in education, nor employment</i>	Total youth	Self-employed	Employed	Not working	Total adults
<i>Totally agree</i>	10.4%	11.0%	9.4%	10.5%	10.5%	12.1%	8.5%	11.2%
<i>Tend to agree</i>	32.3%	32.3%	25.7%	31.4%	26.6%	29.7%	22.5%	27.9%
<i>Tend to disagree</i>	28.3%	29.8%	23.6%	28.3%	28.4%	31.0%	30.0%	30.5%
<i>Totally disagree</i>	21.1%	21.8%	34.7%	23.4%	29.8%	22.6%	33.3%	25.6%
<i>DK</i>	7.9%	5.0%	6.6%	6.4%	4.7%	4.5%	5.7%	4.8%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on Eurobarometer 85.1OVR: *European Youth in 2016* and the standard Eurobarometer 85.1, April 2016. Percentages are shown on columns. All EU 28 member states were included.

Table 6 further compares youth on other 3 forms of political participation: taking part in public debates, signing petitions and expressing views on public issues on the Internet or social media. Young men tend to take part in public debates to a larger extent (19.6%) compared to young women (12.6%). These participation differences are particularly high between males (25.3%) and females (13.8%) who are both in education and employment. Conversely, participation differences between young males and females are smaller among those who are neither in education, nor in education. There are no statistically significant differences between female NEETs and other categories of young women in terms of rates of participation to public debates.

On the other hand, young NEETs, regardless of gender, tend to sign petitions to a significantly lower extent than those who are in education and employment (see Table 6).

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group. In addition to the basic sample about 200 young respondents in each country were interviewed (about 300 in DE).

However, the effect of the occupational status on signing petitions is stronger in the case of young women, compared to young men. Thus, in terms of signing petitions there is a difference of 26.6 percentage points between young women who are both in employment and education, on the one hand, and young women who are neither in employment nor education, on the other hand. As data in Table 6 reveals, young people (both women and men) that are both in education and employment tend to have higher rates of signing petitions than other categories of youth. Within this occupational group, young women have petitioned more than men (60% compared to 49.5%).

As data in Table 6 further points out, the young NEETs women have expressed their views on public issues on the Internet or social media to a significantly lower extent, than those who are in education or employment. On the contrary, occupational status seems to play no statistically significant role in differentiating between rates of online engagement among young men. The highest levels of expressing views on public issues online are recorded among young women who are both in education and employment (60.6%), while the lowest rates are registered among those who are neither in education, nor in employment (36.5%). Overall, young men tend to slightly engage more on public issues online than young women (44% compared to 40%), However, among young people who are both in education and employment, women are more likely to participate online than men.

**Table 6: Youth participation in public debates, signing petitions and online engagement**

Have you done any of the following in the last two years?	Gender	Young people who are...				Total aged 15-30
		Both in education and employment	In employment	In education	Neither in education, nor employment	
<b><i>Taken part in a public debate</i></b>	Male (NS)	25.3%	19.7%	19.7%	17.7%	19.6%
	Female (NS)	13.8%	11.8%	12.9%	13.2%	12.6%
<b><i>Signed a petition (on paper or online)</i></b>	Male**	49.5%	32.5%	35.2%	29.1%	33.8%
	Female***	60.0%	33.7%	40.1%	33.4%	36.8%
<b><i>Expressed your views on public issues on the Internet or social media</i></b>	Male (NS)	44.6%	45.3%	42.3%	46.2%	44.0%
	Female***	60.6%	39.7%	40.0%	36.5%	40.0%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on *Flash Eurobarometer 373: Europeans' Engagement in Participatory Democracy*, February 2013. Note: Data entries represent percentages within the categories of youth's occupational and educational status by respondents' gender. All EU 27 member states were included. Significance levels: NS, non-significant  $p > 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Socially excluded youth are less likely to participate in the electoral process and to engage in the mechanisms of representative democracy more generally. Table 7 illustrates that young people who are neither in education, nor employment participate less in local, national or EU level elections, compared to other categories of youth. This pattern holds both for young women and men suggesting that exclusion from the labor market and the education system is generally associated with exclusion from the political

sphere, presumably as part of a larger phenomenon of social exclusion. Overall, electoral turnout seems to be higher among young men than among young women. However, young women who are in education tend to have higher rates of participation than men who are in education, especially in local elections. Nevertheless, among the NEETs, men tend to have a higher electoral participation than women and this pattern is particularly visible in national and European elections.

In general, members of a political party are more likely to vote in elections than non-members (Tătar 2013). While political party membership is generally low among youth (Ekström and Sveningsson 2019), it tends to be even lower among young people who are neither in employment, nor in education or training. Thus, vulnerable youth are less likely to participate in the actions of political organizations or parties. For instance, data in Table 3 (row 4) points out that only 2.8% of NEETs have participated in the activities of political parties. In comparison, 7.5% of those who are both in education and employment, 5.5% of those who are only in education and 4.1% of young people who are only in employment have participated in the activities of political organizations, in the last 12 months. Thus, vulnerable young persons excluded from economic and social life, also tend to be marginalized in the basic processes of representative democracy.

**Table 7: Electoral participation of European youth**

During the last 3 years, did you vote in any political election at the local, national or EU level?	Gender	Young people who are...				Total aged 15-30
		Both in education and employment	In employment	In education	Neither in education, nor employment	
<i>Yes, at local level</i>	<b>Male</b>	61.9%	59.7%	52.7%	51.0%	56.5%
	<b>Female</b>	54.0%	60.6%	59.2%	43.0%	55.3%
<i>Yes, at national level</i>	<b>Male</b>	61.8%	58.0%	46.1%	50.8%	53.7%
	<b>Female</b>	52.7%	55.4%	47.2%	37.0%	48.1%
<i>Yes, at EU level</i>	<b>Male</b>	49.8%	40.3%	37.3%	37.8%	39.5%
	<b>Female</b>	32.4%	36.4%	39.7%	26.3%	34.5%

*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on *Flash Eurobarometer 408: European Youth*, December 2014 - January 2015 (European Commission 2015). *Note:* Data entries represent percentages of self-declared voters within the categories of youth's occupational and educational status by the level of elections and respondents' gender. Persons, who were at that time not eligible to vote, were excluded from this analysis.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Starting from a conceptualization of youth civic and political disengagement as a dimension of social exclusion, the goal of this study was twofold. First, it explored the patterns and magnitude of youth marginalization in the European Union by focusing on the most excluded young people, namely those who are neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEET). Second, the study examined to what extent these young people, experiencing social and economic disadvantage, tend to also be the most politically marginalized category of youth in their societies. Regarding the first goal of the paper, we have shown that young people who are neither in employment, nor in education or training face significantly higher risks of being affected by poverty and other forms of social exclusion. Social exclusion of youth represents a widespread phenomenon in the

EU, although it is unevenly distributed between member states. At EU level, almost 5 million young persons aged 20-24 were in 2015 neither in employment, nor in education or training (Eurostat 2016, 2). According to our own analysis, the share of the NEETs increases considerably with age: from 7.5% for the age group 16-20 in 2016, to 13.7% in the age group 21-25, and to more than one fifth of those aged 26-30 (20.1%). The NEETs have fewer resources that would enable them to fully participate in the democratic life of their societies. Their well-being is also affected by their vulnerable social status and they have lower levels of satisfaction with life, compared to other categories of young people. Moreover, the NEETs are more likely to have the feeling that youth in their country were marginalized during the economic crisis. The perception that it is they, the younger generation, who are increasingly excluded from the economic and social spheres, “bearing the brunt of the cuts and the austerity measures across Europe as a whole, is likely to fuel feelings of unfairness” (Briggs 2017, 6), particularly among the marginalized youth.

Secondly, the paper highlighted the interdependence between social, economic and political exclusions. Vulnerable youth in the European Union face the risk of multiple exclusions that mutually reinforce each other: from the labor market, from education and from the democratic life of their societies. Our study showed that young people who are neither in employment, nor in education or training have systematically lower levels of civic and political engagement, compared to other categories of youth. Thus, in terms of civic engagement, the NEETs tend to participate less in the activities of various non-governmental organizations ranging from sports clubs, youth organizations, cultural and environmental associations, to community organizations or political parties. They also tend to volunteer less than other categories of youth. The substantial civic engagement gap between the NEETs and those who are both in employment and education suggests that workplace and schools are places that provide opportunities for recruitment and mobilization of young people for civic engagement. Marginalized young persons are in a situation that hinders their access to such places and thus they generally miss the opportunities and the potential benefits derived from participation in civil society organizations.

Structural barriers such as lack of access to employment or education are associated with lower levels of political engagement too. The NEETs have lower levels of interest in politics, compared to other categories of youth. Moreover, the young NEETs and the unemployed adults tend to have rather similarly low levels of political interest, despite their generational and life-cycle differences. These findings suggest that as today’s youth will age, they will not automatically become more interested in politics. Therefore, political interest is not merely a consequence of a person’s lifecycle or belonging to a generation, but it is also linked with access to employment and education, both of which might offer individuals higher stakes in society and a better awareness of the relevance of politics into their lives. On the other hand, socially excluded youth, who have little to no control over the basic circumstances of their lives, are less likely to be interested in politics, voice their interests in the political process or believe they can understand and influence political decisions. Socially excluded youth are often pushed to the margins of society and politics and this impedes their access to power and decision-making processes and institutions. Consequently, they usually feel powerless and unable to take control over decisions that affect their lives. As our findings showed, the NEETs are also less likely to sign petitions on paper or online, to join the activities of political parties or to vote in local, national or European elections, compared with other categories of young people.

These findings have several methodological, theoretical, public policy and normative implications. Methodologically, it is highly relevant how we conceptualize and

measure youth in our studies. Young people are not a homogeneous category, but instead they represent a diverse and highly heterogeneous group in society, with a complex variety of identities and socio-economic, as well as educational backgrounds. From a theoretical point of view, placing individuals in the category of youth only by looking at their age is common in youth studies based on lifecycle or generational theories. Such an approach not only obscures the high diversity of situations in which young people live, but also hinders our understanding of the root causes of youth political (dis)engagement. In this paper we have argued that youth civic and political disengagement are in fact forms of social exclusion. As Duffy (1995) suggests, the focus is not on investigating whether political exclusion is caused by social exclusion but, rather, understanding that political exclusion is a form of social exclusion. Acknowledging the interplay between various dimensions of social exclusion that mutually reinforce each other provides valuable policy insights for reducing youth marginalization and breaking the vicious circle that perpetuates it. Our research suggests two such policy pathways, namely stimulating youth long-term employment and better access to education, which along with access to housing could facilitate young people's successful transition to adulthood, while also increasing their stake in society and their awareness of the relevance of politics into their lives. In normative terms, youth social exclusion might undermine democracy particularly if young citizens' engagement is obstructed by structural constraints which can widen and reinforce the inequality of political influence of those who participate and those who do not (Tătar 2015b). Participants can make their voice heard in the political arena and their interests have better chances of being represented in the political process, compared to those that do not or cannot participate. Thus, the participatory bias that comes along with social exclusion compromises the very principle of political equality that underlies democracy (Dahl 1989, Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995).

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