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# Italy

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## NATIONAL LEVEL ASSESSMENT REPORT



# Italy National Level Assessment Report

**Findings from the National Level Assessment on the level of awareness, gaps in knowledge, and barriers to participation amongst young people in civic democratic life and decision-making processes in Italy and Europe**

IRC Italia & Glocal Factory



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## Executive Summary

This National Level Assessment Report explores the current state of youth civic knowledge and engagement in Italy, within the framework of the ParticipACTION project. This report integrates findings from desk research, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), surveys, interviews, interactive seminars, and national roundtables conducted by IRC Italia and Glocal Factory during the initial phases (WP1, WP2 and WP3) of the ParticipACTION project. The Report shines a light on young people themselves, presenting their proposed solutions for improving access, inclusivity, and representation in democratic decision-making processes. Through this methodology, the ParticipACTION project critically analyzes the specific areas the EU and Member States like Italy can concentrate on to dramatically improve civic engagement and democratic knowledge amongst its youth. Contrary to the common perception that Italian youth are disengaged or uninformed, the findings reveal a more nuanced reality: young people are deeply concerned about social and political issues but often feel alienated from traditional institutions. This sense of exclusion is driven by a lack of trust, limited representation, and a poor understanding of European institutional processes, challenges that are especially acute for youth with migratory backgrounds. Structural barriers such as discrimination, financial hardship, and inaccessible communication further hinder their inclusion.

To address this, young people strongly support comprehensive civic education at all school levels, including lessons on EU politics, media literacy, and civic responsibility. They also call for greater institutional support for youth-led initiatives, more inclusive participation opportunities, and safe spaces for political dialogue. Improved communication through modern media platforms is essential to make politics more relatable and accessible.

Bridging the gap between youth and institutions requires more than information; it demands inclusive policies, trust-building, and meaningful avenues for engagement that empower young people to actively shape their societies.

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# 1. Background

## 1.1 National Level Assessment Report Overview

The National Level Assessment Report aims at blending together the various research phases of the ParticipACTION project, including desk research, Focus Group Discussions (“FGDs”), survey, interviews, interactive seminars and national roundtables. It furthers the initial overview, elaborated in the desk research, of the level of awareness, gaps in knowledge and barriers to participation amongst young people from diverse backgrounds in civic democratic life and decision-making processes in Europe, with the original data collected by IRC Italia and Glocal Factory during WP1, WP2, and WP3. The National Level Assessment Report will also offer an overview of the suggested solutions, offered by the youth themselves, to the obstacles that hinder youth participation.

## 1.2 The Italian Context

Italy, a parliamentary republic with a President serving as Head of State and a Prime Minister as Head of Government, faces persistent challenges related to youth civic engagement and complex migration dynamics. As a founding member of the European Union (“EU”) in 1993 and key player in the Eurozone, Italy has long experienced both outward and inward mobility, becoming a hub for migration while also seeing many of its young citizens seek opportunities abroad. These mobility trends, combined with demographic decline, economic uncertainty, and institutional distrust, have contributed to persistently low youth participation in civic and political life.

As of 2025, approximately **58.9 million people live in Italy** making it the third most populous country in the EU (Eurostat, 2025a). From 2002 to 2023, the number of Italians aged 18-34 fell by nearly 23%, while the 65+ population rose by over 54%, pushing the median age close to 50, with 48.7 years, well above the EU average of 44.7 (Macchi, 2025). This dramatic demographic shift has earned Italy a reputation as the **oldest countries in Europe** and fifth-oldest population in the world, with a shrinking youth population and growing elderly majority (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d). These trends place significant pressure on public services and policymaking and have direct implications for youth civic participation, as younger generations often feel sidelined in a society increasingly shaped by older voters. Youth unemployment (under 25s) remains high, with nearly **one in five young Italians being unemployed**, nearly twice the rate of many EU counterparts, driving disillusionment and emigration among young professionals in search of better prospects abroad (Eurostat, 2025b). Italy is experiencing a **significant brain drain**: in 2024, approximately **156,000 Italians aged 25-34** left the country, many of them university graduates,

seeking work opportunities abroad (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2025). At the same time, Italy has been at the forefront of the EU refugee crisis as one of Europe's southernmost nations and primary entry point for migrants arriving from North Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, often via dangerous Mediterranean crossings and Balkan Route. Balancing its obligations as an EU Member State with domestic pressures, Italy continues to grapple with integrating new arrivals while addressing the socioeconomic forces contributing to youth disengagement and population decline.

### 1.2.1 Asylum seekers and other migrants

As of 2024, Third Country Nationals (TCNs) - defined as non-EU citizens residing in an EU member state - make up a significant portion of Italy's population. According to Eurostat's Migration and migrant population statistics, there were approximately **over 5 million third-country nationals (TCNs), representing 8.6% of the population**, and another almost 1.6 EU citizens (2.7%) living in Italy at the time (Eurostat, 2025c). The largest TCN communities include individuals from Albania, Morocco, China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Ukraine.

In 2022, family reunification accounted for 38.9% of residence permits issued in Italy, followed by work-related permits at 19.8%, and study permits at 7.5%. Regarding naturalization, 194,071 TCNs acquired Italian citizenship in 2022, a significant increase compared to 109,561 in 2021 and 118,513 in 2020 (European Migration Network, 2024).

The **TCN population in Italy is notably younger compared to the native population**, with the proportion of individuals aged 15-64 being almost 26 percentage points higher in the foreign-born population than in the native population, highlighting the importance of engaging this demographic in civic and political life. However, their participation remains low due to a combination of legal, structural, and cultural barriers, including **lack of voting rights, limited access to political representation** (see Section 4.3) **and discouraging integration policies**.

In terms of newly arrived migrants in Italy, since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, over **200,000 individuals** fleeing the conflict have applied for **temporary protection status** in Italy (UNHCR, n.d.). As of **July 2025, 36,545 migrants** have arrived in Italy by sea - an **11% increase** compared to the **same period in 2024** (33,035 arrivals). However, these figures remain significantly **lower than 2023**, when **88,464 sea arrivals** were recorded by the end of July (Ministero dell'Interno, 2025). The Italian government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has made it publicly known that she will continue to lead the country towards implementing more restrictive policies for migrants. The most notable and controversial policy is the Italy-Albania Agreement that aims to externalize migration management by transferring migrants intercepted on their journey to Italy to reception centers in Albania, a non-EU member state. Many human rights activists have publicly criticized this agreement claiming it will lead to major human rights and international law violations (Institute of New Europe, 2025).

## 2. Methodology

The research for this Report was conducted by the team of IRC Italia from November 2024 to May 2025. A **mixed methods approach** was employed, combining both primary and secondary research methodologies following guidelines provided by the Cyprus partner Generation for Change CY. Primary data collection included FGDs, a survey, feedback from awareness-raising seminars, insights from our National Roundtable, and key-person interviews. Secondary research involved a review of grey literature, academic articles, and reports from civil society organizations.

This section details the mixed-methods approach and methodology used for the various research phases, including FGDs, survey, desk research, interviews, interactive seminars, and national roundtables and gives an overview of participants' demographics.

### 2.1 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

A total of 13 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out by IRC Italia and Glocal Factory, with an approximate duration of two hours. The sessions were audio-recorded when possible, accompanied with written notes. There was a total of 86 youth participants, of which 48 were female and 35 were male. Additionally, 48 were nationals while 38 were TCNs. Mixed and non-mixed FGD in terms of nationality and country of origin were conducted with the selected participants trying to maintain homogeneity in the age of participants in each group. Discussions covered awareness of EU institutions, experiences with civic participation, and proposed solutions. The sessions were semi-structured and based on open-ended questions covering three themes:

- **Knowledge** of EU institutions and strategies
- **Participation** in civic or political life (e.g., voting, protests, volunteering)
- **Proposed solutions** to encourage solidarity and youth engagement

Each session was guided by open-ended questions that encourage peer reflection and personal storytelling.

### 2.2 Survey

A survey was conducted online and anonymously between January and February 2025 on the level of awareness of youth on the EU, its institutions and policies.

Respondents were requested to answer a total of 20 questions:<sup>1</sup>

1. **4 demographics questions** to disaggregate data at the analysis stage (gender, country of origin, country of residence, age)

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of the survey can be found in Annex 2.

2. 11 closed and open-ended questions on the topic of **awareness of European institutions**, action plans, and strategies
3. 4 closed and open-ended questions on their **participation in European civic democratic life**
4. 1 open-ended question on the topic of **solidarity** and the respondents' **personal experiences** with it

The survey could be completed in either Italian or English to address potential language barriers of people with diverse backgrounds. A total of 67 youth filled out the survey. Their age ranged between 16 and 23, 49 were females, 17 males, while 1 participant preferred not to answer (Fig.B). The two age ranges, 16-19 years old and 20-23 years old, were fairly even with 31 and 36 participants in each respective cohort. 57 participants listed Italy as their country of origin with the remaining indicating Tunisia, Belarus, Nigeria, Morocco, Albania, Gambia, and England/France (Fig.A).

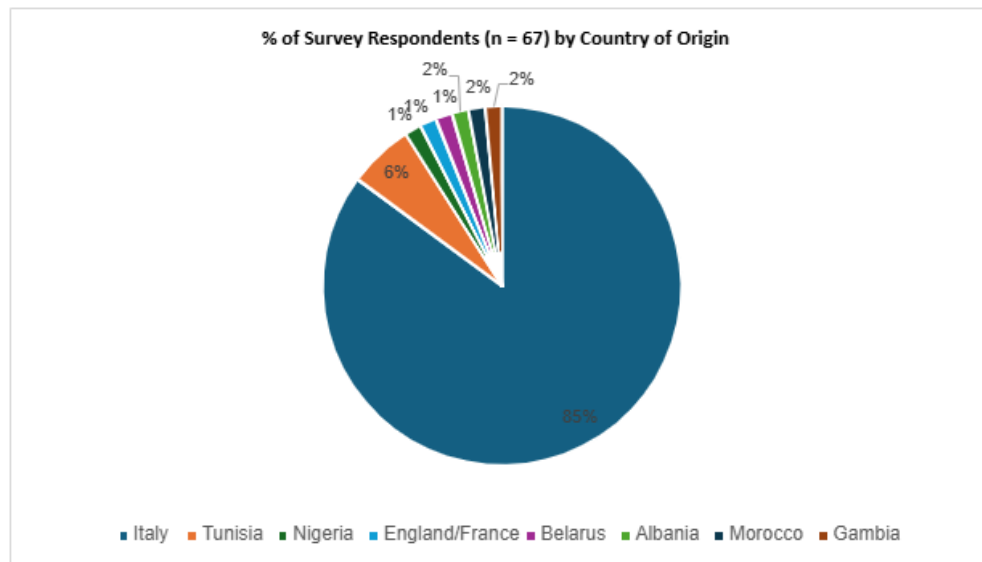


Fig. A



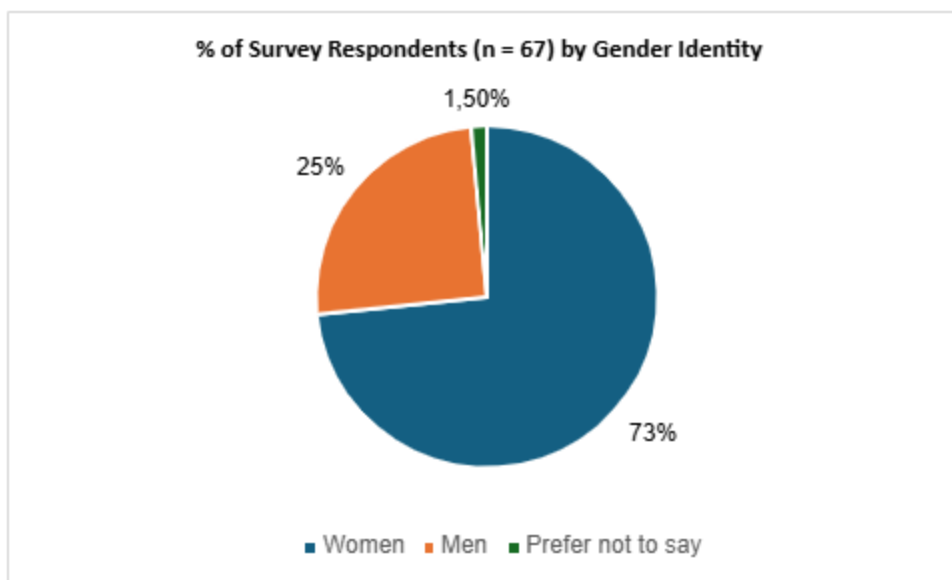


Fig. B

## 2.3 Desk Research

The sources used for compiling the desk research consisted mostly of **grey literature provided by national and European institutions**. The main factors considered when examining the obstacles hindering youth participation in civic and political life at a European level were **migratory background and gender**, including LGBTQIA+ background.

Each subsection of the desk research was guided by a set of dedicated research questions, which are available in Annex 1. The desk research was compiled in a standalone report, disseminated in April 2025, and available on IRC Italia's website. The insights from the desk research informed the design and implementation of the FGDs (Section 2.1) and Survey (Section 2.2).

## 2.4 Interviews

As part of the ParticipACTION project's broader research and validation process, two interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in Italy, one with a representative from a youth-led organization based in Trieste and the other with representative from a women- and migrant-led organization in Milan.

The primary aim of these interviews was to gather expert insights from **individuals working directly with young people**, in order to either confirm or challenge the findings that had emerged from FGDs and survey. The interviews explored the stakeholders' perspectives on the level of **knowledge young people possess regarding the three selected project themes** (Migration;

Values, Rights, Rule of Law and Security; and Education, Culture, Youth and Sport) as well as their level of engagement in civic and democratic activities and potential barriers. Additionally, the discussions aimed to assess whether any noticeable **changes in these areas had been observed over recent years**. Interviews provided valuable context and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of youth engagement across Italy.

## 2.5 Interactive Seminars

As part of the project WP2, three **awareness-raising Interactive Seminars** were successfully conducted in Italy as part of the ParticipACTION project. These events were designed using a structured, participatory approach aimed at meaningfully engaging young people. The seminars opened with a general introduction to the event and an overview of the project's objectives. This was followed by a presentation on the EU's institutions, core values, and the wide range of opportunities available for youth engagement. The second part of each seminar introduced the project's five key themes (**Gender Equality; European Democracy; Values and Rights, Rule of Law and Security; Migration; and Education, Culture, Youth and Sport**) through interactive, tailored methods. Participants took part in dynamic, hands-on activities such as group and individual exercises, role-playing, simulations, and structured debates. These activities fostered active listening and meaningful peer dialogue.

Following these in-depth discussions, participants were asked to vote on the three themes they felt were most important for the project's focus. In Italy, the most voted themes were:

1. Gender Equality
2. Migration
3. Values, Rights, Rule of Law & Security

However, after incorporating votes from other participating countries and organizations, the final three selected themes selected to guide the overall project and around which the National Roundtables (2.6) would be built were the following:

- **Migration**
- **Values, Rights, Rule of Law & Security**
- **Education, Culture, Youth and Sport**

Gender equality (cross-cutting focus across all themes)

Several younger TCN participants, particularly high school students, were inspired to share their personal migration experiences. These contributions significantly enriched the discussions, promoting a strong environment of **peer learning, empathy, and inclusion**.

## 2.6 National Roundtables

As part of the project's WP3, IRC and Glocal Factory hosted **four national roundtable** discussions featuring young people and high-level stakeholders from both local and national levels to discuss the core three themes of the project (**Migration; Values, Rights, Rule of Law & Security; Education, Culture, Youth and Sport**). The Roundtables aimed to encourage participants to brainstorm ideas on how to improve youth engagement and knowledge on the selected themes.

## 3. Challenges and Limitations

Research on youth civic knowledge and participation in Italy, particularly among TCNs, presents several unique challenges and limitations linked to the **socio-political landscape** and **structural characteristics of the country**.

### 3.1 Desk Research Limitations

The main limitation of the desk research stage of the project was the **lack of existing academic** literature on the subject of youth civic engagement in Italy, especially among young people with a migratory background. This gap in knowledge constrained the volume of desk research and significantly limited opportunities for in-depth comparative analysis between the two target populations.

### 3.2 Primary Research Limitations

The primary research efforts were constrained by the **limited duration of the project** activities and relatively narrow age range of the target group. While the research has yielded interesting insights, these limitations underscore the need for continued, inclusive, and geographically balanced research efforts in Italy, with increased attention to intersectionality, linguistic diversity, and underrepresented youth voices.

#### 3.2.1 Outreach and Sample Size Limitations

Challenges were primarily linked to the recruitment of participants due to the relatively **limited time to conduct outreach and research activities** as well as difficulties in establishing effective engagement with schools and universities or other youth centers.

Additionally, **finding times and days** convenient for all participants proved particularly challenging, especially during exam sessions. During these periods, participation rates dropped significantly, requiring some activities to be repeated in order to ensure that all interested individuals had the opportunity to take part in them. This added an extra layer of complexity to the planning and implementation phases.

As a result, the small sample size of FGDs and the survey limits the generalisability of findings.

### 3.2.2 Self-Selection Bias

Individuals already **engaged in previous EU projects and/or initiatives were more likely to learn about and thus take part in the ParticipACTION project**, as reflected in their prior experiences and expressed interests. To reduce this potential bias, staff made efforts to connect with more diverse groups of youth by meeting with them in the spaces where they gather. Outreach activities were conducted at youth centers and schools throughout Milan and Turin to attract a diverse group of participants with varying levels of knowledge. In addition, the IRC invited young people to its central Milan office to help them become acquainted with the organization and its activities.

### 3.2.3 Language Barriers

Language barriers were addressed by offering respondents the possibility to **answer the survey either in English or in Italian**. This was also the case with the different activities of the project (FGDs, Interactive Seminars, National Roundtables) which were held in both English and Italian. However, for participants whose mother tongue was neither English nor Italian, engaging in discussions in a less familiar language may have limited the depth and quality of their interactions.

### 3.2.4 Geographic Focus

The geographic focus of the research also introduced potential bias. Since IRC Italia and Glocal Factory are headquartered in Milan and Verona respectively, much of the participant **recruitment and data collection was carried out in Northern Italy**, with additional participants based in Parma and Turin. This disproportionate geographic representation limits the perspectives of youth from other regions and rural areas. These factors may have influenced the salience of certain themes in the findings.

## 4. Key Findings

The synthesis of desk research, FGDs, surveys, interviews, Interactive Seminars and the National Roundtables offers a detailed understanding of youth civic engagement in Italy, highlighting areas of **knowledge (4.1), participation (4.2), and existing barriers (4.3)**.

### 4.1. Knowledge

This section examines how young people in Italy **understand European institutions, policies, legislative actions, and strategies, as well as possible gaps in their knowledge** and current attitudes toward the EU. It relies on the latest data available, policy reports, academic studies as well as testimonials from the youth who joined the ParticipACTION events and findings from the ParticipACTION survey.

#### 4.1.1 Knowledge of European Institutions, Rule of Law and Fundamental Values of EU

Data reveal a **limited understanding of European institutions among young people**: according to a survey conducted with the support of the Europe for Citizens Program, between 27% and 40% of respondents in primary and secondary school and between 26% and 31% in higher education in several European countries had no information at all about the EU. (Federazione Italiana Diritti Umani 2021). Furthermore, the *You(th) and the 2024 European elections: A survey to understand the concerns of young Europeans* showed that, when asked about their knowledge of the functions of European institutions, in particular the European Parliament ("EP") most respondents (aged 16-35 years old, half of whom were Italian citizens) showed uncertainty, with 21% of them admitting they have no firm idea of what the EP does (INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, 2024).

Available data for Italy from the "Special Eurobarometer 553 - Rule of Law" survey found that only 37% of Italians feel informed about the European rule of law, against an EU average of 53%. Similarly, only 40% feel informed about the fundamental values of the EU, compared to the EU average of 51% (European Commission, 2024).

The results of the ParticipACTION survey confirms a generalized gap in knowledge among youth, with **43%** of ParticipACTION survey respondents stating that they know only one EU institution/policy/initiative and **12%** admitting to not knowing any at all (Fig.C). Among them, the European Parliament, the Erasmus+ program, and the European Commission are the most frequently identified.

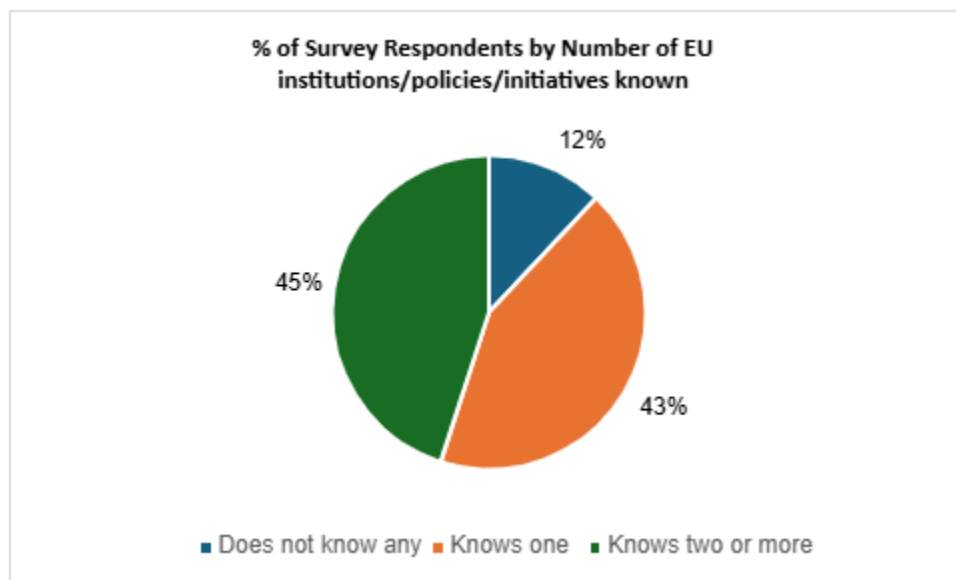


Fig. C



**61%** of ParticipACTION survey respondents reported not knowing any of the six fundamental values of the EU. (Fig. D). Among those who indicated some level of awareness, the most commonly four mentioned values were **equality, freedom, democracy, and dignity** (Fig. E).

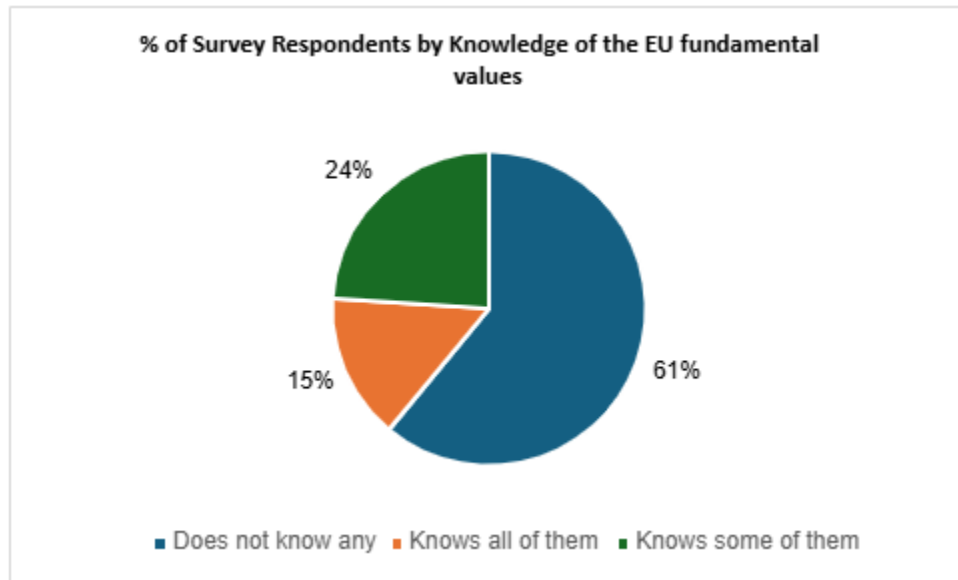


Fig. D

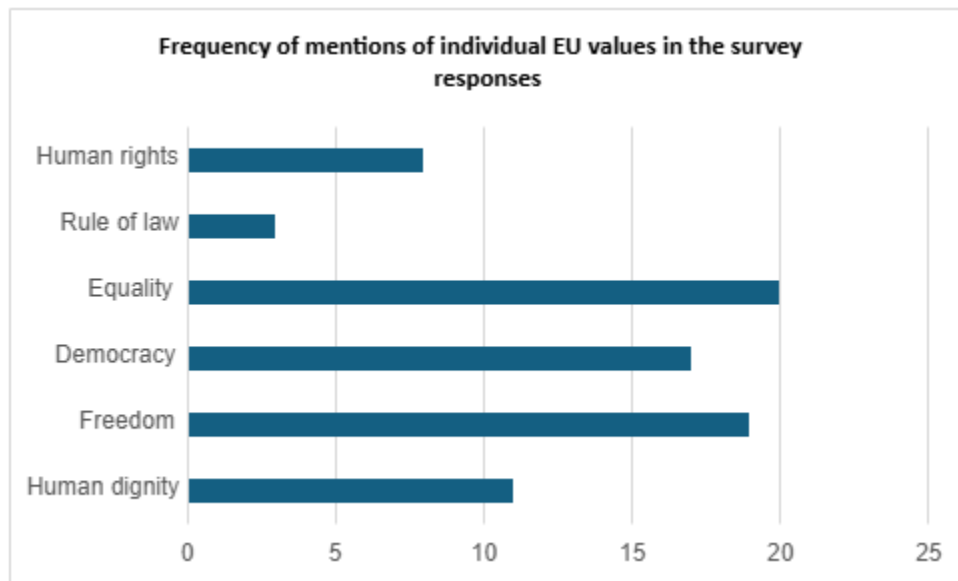


Fig. E

This data points to a knowledge that is often superficial and fragmented, which hinders active engagement in European civic life.

During the FGDs, participants explored the potential causes for this reality, often pointing to a general **lack of accessible and effective information** regarding European institutions, policies, and initiatives. The level of knowledge among participants in FGDs varied significantly. In

particular, TCNs tended to show less familiarity and understanding of European institutions and processes. On the other hand, some FGDs participants had a deep understanding of European institutions, which does not fully align with findings from both the survey and desk research. This was often attributed to exposure to EU institutions through mandatory ‘civic education’ classes (*‘educazione civica’*) in schools or through university courses. In particular, participants mentioned how this subject can be taught by professors with different education background, with the content and quality of teaching that can greatly vary. As a result, students do not receive consistent or meaningful teaching on the EU, and the perceived usefulness of what is taught often depends on the teacher's engagement. Additionally, FGDs participants expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the grading system used in enhancing learning and promoting real interest. Similarly, in the National Roundtables participants expressed a **need for more comprehensive civic education** early on in their **childhood**. They argued that when young people are educated early about their rights and the institutions that protect them, they are more likely to engage in civic life - whether through voting, protesting, or even running for office. Young people **do not feel represented by institutions** and that building awareness from a young age at the local level could help foster a cultural shift toward more active and informed participation.

#### 4.1.2 Knowledge of Opportunities for Active Engagement of Young People

Nearly a third of the ParticipACTION survey respondents (32.8%) stated that they did not know any ways to actively engage with EU activities at all, the same percentage as those who said they know only one way to engage, while 34% identified between two to four ways. This indicates a **fragmented understanding of the available channels for civic involvement** at the EU level.

Among those who were aware of specific EU participation opportunities, the most known by respondents (49%) was the ability to visit the EP. This was followed by the right to submit petitions to the EP (28%), while 16% mentioned the European Youth Event (EYE) and EYE Online. These findings indicate that, although certain EU initiatives are familiar to some youth, **overall awareness is limited**, highlighting the need for improved communication and effective outreach on youth participation opportunities at the EU level.

Desk research as well points out that specific **data regarding Italian youth's awareness of European strategies remains deficient**, with some data suggesting that only 25.7% of people born between 1997 and 2012 are aware of the Next Generation EU program (Sylla, 2024). In contrast, it appears that young individuals in Italy have a strong understanding of European connectivity strategies, particularly those related to the Erasmus+ program. 55% of young people (15-30) in Italy confirms having heard of the Erasmus + initiatives, particularly the one for students (18+ years old), slightly above the EU average of 49%. In contrast, awareness of other EU programs is significantly lower: only 9% had heard of DiscoverEU and 7% of the European Solidarity Corps. Notably, 13% of respondents stated they were unaware of any of these opportunities. Young women are more likely to be aware of EU-funded opportunities for young people to stay in another EU country than their male peers and the higher young people's level of

education, the more likely they are informed of Erasmus+ opportunities for students (European Commission, 2024).

Most FGDs participants were **unfamiliar** with specific initiatives related to EU strategies to promote youth democratic and civic participation. Those who were aware of programs such as Erasmus+, mobility opportunities, events, or informational campaigns related to the EU stated that they had learned about them primarily through their universities or schools, and several participants have participated or would soon participate in Erasmus exchange programs. A clear pattern emerged: **participants who were more informed about the EU and had firsthand experience with its programs tended to feel a stronger sense of engagement, belonging, and trust in the EU as a representative institution.**

This underscores the crucial role that educational institutions and, in particular, individual professors given the structure of civic education in Italy, play in maintaining a connection between young people and EU initiatives. Participants noted that these are their **main or even sole source of exposure to such opportunities**, highlighting the importance of strengthening and systematizing this link.

Moreover, FGD participants acknowledged the role of **youth organizations and social movements** in **raising awareness**. Indeed, FGD participants also emphasized that the responsibility for disseminating EU-related information does not rest solely with schools and teachers. They pointed to “mediators”, individuals or organizations meant to inform youth about EU opportunities, as sometimes **failing to use appropriate or effective channels** to reach young people.

As for young **second-generation migrants** who participated in the FGDs, their engagement with politics and initiatives of the EU appeared limited, often marked by a sense of detachment. Some expressed the **belief that politics is inherently corrupt and ultimately ineffective**, which contributes to their lack of interest or involvement. In some cases, their status as TCNs also meant they lacked the necessary credentials to access certain EU initiatives. Moreover, even if they recognized that Italy is a member of the EU, many had difficulty contextualizing what that truly means in practice.

As a result, many young people perceive the EU as having limited relevance to their daily lives. According to the Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy (Special Eurobarometer 545), 27% of youth aged 15-30 believe that the EU has no impact on their everyday life (European Commission, 2024a). Another study focusing on Generation Z (born 1997–2012) shows that the majority of young people (61%) feel that decisions made at the EU level have neither a positive nor negative impact (Sylla, 2024).

## 4.2 Participation

Young people in Italy demonstrate a **notable level of civic and social engagement**, as reflected in recent data highlighting their participation in both formal and informal avenues of activism and community involvement. Data and research underscore a broader trend: youth participation is **evolving from traditional, formal channels toward more informal, grassroots forms of engagement**, often facilitated by digital platforms and social media, but youth with migrant background tend to be less politically active than their peers.

### 4.2.1 Voting, Parties and Representative Structures

Traditional forms of participation, like voting, remain a less utilized engagement method by youth. **Voter turnout among young people remains low**: in the 2024 EP elections, the highest percentage of abstention to elections among all age groups was registered among young Italians between 18 and 27 years old, with 54.1% who decided not to vote (Ipsos, 2024).

In terms of political membership, in Italy, the minimum age to join a political party varies from 14 to 16, depending on the internal regulations of each party, and there are no dedicated quotas or specific arrangements in favor of young candidates (Dipartimento per le Politiche Giovanili e il Servizio Civile Universale, n.d).

As for candidacy, in the 2022 national elections in Italy, out of almost 5,000 candidates, only 15% were under 40 years old, and less than 3% were under 30 years old (Dipartimento per gli Affari Interni e Territoriali, 2022). This may be partly attributed to the age limits outlined by the Italian Constitution for becoming a Member of Parliament: the minimum age to stand as a Member of Parliament is 25 years for the Chamber of Deputies and 40 years for the Senate (Senato della Repubblica, n.d). During the 2024 EU elections, among 867 Italian candidates (434 men and 433 women), the most represented age group was the 46-55 years old one (258), followed by 56-64 years old (178), whereas young people between 18 and 35 years old were only 76 (Nesticò, 2024). Out of the elected candidates, only 6 MEPs were younger than 35 (8%), with the youngest elected being 29 years old (Pagella Politica, 2024).

FGDs participants confirmed a **widespread sense of abstentionism among their peers**. One participant attributed this to lack of strong guiding beliefs among politicians and people in general, adding that nowadays people vote for politicians rather than ideas. Participants pointed out that young voters do not believe that voting can lead to real and meaningful change and they feel **disconnected and underrepresented**. They also highlighted a **polarization of the political discourse as a reason for their abstentionism**. This is supported by secondary data: 22% of young Italians who were not planning to vote or were unsure about voting in the 2024 European elections cited a general distrust in the political system as the main reason, higher than the EU average of 17%. This was followed by 17% believing that their vote would not make a difference (European Commission, 2024).

The **generational divide in voting preferences** is another issue raised by participants. There is a sense among some that older generations tend to vote for outdated values that no longer resonate with the perspectives and priorities of younger generations. This division can lead to frustration among younger voters, who feel their voices and concerns are not adequately represented in political decisions. For them, political participation involves more than voting; it also involves staying informed and active in community efforts and global discussions.

*“Voting is a right and duty of the citizen and abstention from voting represents the collapse of democracy.” (ParticipACTION Survey respondent)*

## 4.2.2 Advocacy and Non-Electoral Participation

### 4.2.2.1: Youth Participation: Present, but Evolving

When asked about their prior civic and political participation within the past year, respondents to the ParticipACTION survey reported a diverse range of activities, indicating varying levels of engagement. A majority (52%) stated that they had exercised their right to vote at the local, national, or European level, highlighting that electoral participation remains a primary form of engagement for young people, though this somewhat contrasts with the trends highlighted in the desk research above. Furthermore, 34% of respondents reported being involved in protest or boycott actions, signaling a willingness to engage in more direct or issue-based forms of activism. Additionally, 31% were active through social media and 21% reported participation in volunteer activities, suggesting a commitment to community involvement and social contribution, even if not always through formal political practices.

Recent data from the 2024 Eurobarometer survey on “Young People and Democracy” provides valuable insights into the levels and forms of civic and political engagement among youth in Italy, which also shows that political participation among young people (15-30) in Italy slightly exceeds the EU average. 52% of people in Italy has engaged in an action to change society, sought social change by signing petitions, joining demonstrations, and contacting politicians, compared to 48% across the EU. These efforts were most often focused on human rights, climate change, and equal rights. Additionally, a high percentage of respondents in Italy (62%) had participated in activities of one or more organisations in 2023, primarily sports club, followed by volunteering and cultural organizations (European Commission, 2024).

One stakeholder elaborated that they have witnessed a strong sense of civic participation from their constituents, though not necessarily in the political sense. For example, they mentioned a movement led by young women to clean up their community where, they felt, nothing was being done to take care of the environment and of their neighborhood.

One notable finding from secondary research is that **youth with migrant backgrounds in Italy are significantly less politically active than their native peers** (69.2 vs 45.8%, respectively),



**and as, a consequence, less active in terms of political engagement** (30.3% among youths of foreign origin vs 51.3% among natives) **and political participation** (1.5 vs 14.5%) (Ortensi & Riniolo, 2020).

In terms of participation in opportunities at the EU level, significant gaps in knowledge remain a key barrier, as highlighted in section 4.1.2. Many young people are not aware of the various programs, initiatives, and resources available to them, which limits their ability to engage fully with these opportunities.

*"We are interested [in political participation], but we don't know where to start." (ParticipACTION FGD participant)*

#### *4.2.2.2: The Complex Role of Social Media*

As mentioned above, among the respondents to the ParticipACTION survey, social media emerged as a significant platform for political and social expression, with **31% of them stating that they had used digital platforms to create or share content related to political or social causes**. This finding reflects a growing trend in youth-led digital activism, where online spaces serve as accessible arenas for awareness-raising and mobilization.

Use of **social media as a political means was brought up by several participants in FGDs**: regarding the use of social media in political efforts, participants highlight that they are a useful tool to remain informed and updated on what is happening in the world, even if they emphasized the need to verify sources carefully. On the other hand, respondents pointed out that social media do not offer the possibility of debating and discussion. The knowledge gained through these platforms tends to be superficial, and there is a risk of remaining trapped in one's own media bubble, reinforcing existing beliefs rather than encouraging critical thinking. When asked about ways to express their opinions, some mentioned using Instagram stories, TikTok, and Youtube to share messages, but others disagreed, arguing that social media often perpetuates negative stereotypes and are useless.

According to secondary data, the percentage of young people that believe that **engaging in social media by expressing their opinion**, using hashtags or changing their profile picture can be **an effective action for making their voice heard by decision makers** (23%) is notably lower than the EU average of 32%.

One stakeholder interview revealed that the trend of informal information gathering, developed during the COVID-19 pandemic amongst youth through social media like Youtube, TikTok, and Instagram persist. Interestingly, the youth possessed a sense of 'hopelessness' that from the stakeholder's perspective is accredited to the pandemic which inhibits the youth's ability to physically mobilize in person.

### 4.2.3: Motivations for Participation and the Role of Community

Some FGDs participants viewed **engaging in various forms of civic and political participation** as vital for fostering a sense of responsibility and empowerment within communities. These forms of engagement can range from voting and protesting to volunteering and participating in online discussions on social media platforms.

The motivations for participating in these activities are diverse and multifaceted. Many participants are driven by a desire for personal growth and the opportunity to meet new people who share similar values. Engagement also allows individuals to shape their ideas and contribute to discussions that can lead to real change. For many, the urge to make a tangible impact in their communities is a strong motivator, as is the interest in understanding the complexities of EU dynamics and policies. Moreover, during times of political instability, the need to stand together with others becomes a powerful driving force, providing a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. Stakeholders and FGD participants highlighted how the situation in Palestine emerged as a significant catalyst for political engagement among youth with migratory backgrounds, particularly those with ties to Egypt. The Israel-Palestine conflict operated as a **political awakening for many young people**, who perceived the EU's response as inadequate. Similarly, young people from Western Asian countries experiencing political turmoil - such as Georgia - also found these events to be a driving factor in their political involvement.

### 4.2.4 Reasons Behind Low Participation

Other FGDs participants' understanding of political and civic participation remained largely theoretical, with little to **no practical involvement in activities like campaigning, protesting, or volunteering**. Even when prompted about more accessible forms of engagement, such as using social media platforms, such as Instagram for political expression or activism, they expressed little to no interest in doing so. They consider this form of engagement as futile because they felt powerless. As one FGD participants mentioned *"power does not stand in people's hands"*. **While they demonstrated awareness of key issues, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict or the debate around citizenship rights for migrants in Italy, this awareness did not translate into their willingness or perceived need to engage in specific forms of civic actions.**

*"My peers perceive a lack of prospects and change." (ParticipACTION Survey respondent)*

Low participation on young people side has various causes, including both tangible barriers and intangible factors related to how people perceive the EU and their sense of European identity, which will be explored in the following sections.

## 4.3 Barriers

Numerous barriers consistently **limit young people's ability and willingness to engage civically and politically in Italy and in the EU**, particularly among marginalized groups. These barriers are categorized below into tangible and intangible types.

### 4.3.1 Tangible Barriers

Some of the barriers to young people's participation are clear and **structural**, particularly for first generation migrants from third countries or those born in Italy to foreign parents who have not yet obtained citizenship, second-generation migrants. In Italy, acquiring citizenship is a lengthy and complex process, which limits many young migrants' right to vote and their ability to run for office, for both national and European elections.

#### 4.3.1.1 Legal and Systemic Barriers for Migrants

Migrants who come to Italy face many **legal and systemic barriers inhibiting their inclusion**, their ability to have a say on the policies directly impacting them, and to reap the benefits of full citizenship. In Italy, young TCNs face numerous legal, structural, and social barriers to political participation. The country's citizenship law create long waiting periods and exclude TCNs from voting or running for office at the national or European level, limiting their ability to influence policies that directly impact them. These barriers are compounded by **systemic discrimination in employment, education, and public life, as well as lack of civic education and political representation**. Migrant and racialized youth often experience a sense of **exclusion** from the national political narrative, further reinforced by societal stigma and limited institutional outreach. This exclusion contributes to a broader democratic gap, where entire segments of Italy's youth population remain sidelined from the civic and political processes that shape their lives.

##### 4.3.1.1.1 Access to nationality

The procedures for obtaining citizenship in Italy are long and complex, further limiting political and civic participation (Consiglio Nazionale dell'Economia e del Lavoro, 2023). Under Italian law, a TCN must have legally resided in Italy for at least 10 years before applying for citizenship (Law 91/1992, 1992). This residency period is significantly longer compared to the one required by many other EU countries, which typically ranges from 5 to 7 years (see for example Spain and Germany). Children born in Italy to foreign-born parents do not automatically receive citizenship at birth; they must reside legally and continuously in Italy until they turn 18 and then apply for citizenship within one year after reaching adulthood. Moreover, while the legal waiting period before applying is set, the actual **processing time after submission is often lengthy and unpredictable. The process can take anywhere between 2 to 4 years**, but in some cases, it may take even longer due to administrative backlogs and regional differences in processing times.

Bureaucratic hurdles, lack of clear information, and sometimes complex residency requirements make it difficult for many to navigate the system efficiently and any gaps in peoples' legal residence or administrative delays can slow the process down even more.

This **lengthy naturalization process** for both first and second generations represents a substantial barrier to political integration for TCNs, as it limits their ability to participate in democratic processes until they acquire Italian citizenship.

#### 4.3.1.1.2 Voting restrictions

In most EU countries, including Italy, TCNs are only allowed to vote in local elections, and only after long periods of residence (Constitution of Italy, 1947, Art. 48). Participation in political decision-making processes is largely tied to citizenship status and generally only granted to EU citizens. This restriction represents a significant obstacle for non-EU citizens in perceiving themselves as part of the collective.

*"I don't yet have Italian citizenship; am I truly free to protest? If I receive a complaint, what happens?" (ParticipACTION FGD participant)*

#### 4.3.1.1.3 Political candidacy and representation

In addition to voting restrictions, TCNs without Italian citizenship are **ineligible to run for political office**, either at the local, national or European level. This lack of eligibility results in a serious representation gap, thereby perpetuating a divide between Italian citizens and TCN as well as fostering the perception that the perspectives and needs of TCN communities are undervalued in political discourse.

#### 4.3.1.2 Economic Barriers

Economic constraints pose significant challenges both for young people seeking to participate in civic and political life at local and European levels, and for stakeholders attempting to implement effective youth-centered initiatives.

In terms of economic barriers affecting youth participation more broadly, the **financial burden of accessing higher education significantly limits young people's knowledge** of Italy's civic and political systems, which in turn reduces their engagement. This is especially true for TCN youth, many of whom face added responsibilities such as earning a living in Italy to contribute to their household income or support family members abroad. These pressures often force them to prioritize work and immediate priorities over education and civic involvement, making it even harder to access opportunities that foster political awareness and participation.

Economic limitations also restrict young people's **ability to participate in mobility programs**, which have been shown to enhance both knowledge of and sense of connection to the European Union. A recent study investigated the various reasons respondents gave for not participating in learning mobility programs, specifically in response to the question: *"Is there a more specific reason for not engaging with Erasmus?"* Among the key reasons cited were family restrictions and financial concerns, with some students mentioning strict parental rules or the perceived high costs of the program (INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, 2024).

This is also the case for their possibility to participate in mobility programs. A study that scrutinizes the variegated reasons given by respondents for not participating in learning mobility (responding to the question *"Is there a more specific reason for not engaging with Erasmus?"*).

One of the reasons is **family restrictions and financial concerns also play a significant role**, with some students mentioning strict parents or the program's perceived high costs (INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, 2024). Lack of financial means is also the most commonly cited barrier by young people to participating to activities in another EU countries, mentioned by 37% of respondents (European Commission, 2024).

From the perspective of stakeholders, limited funding also presents a major obstacle to implementing effective youth engagement strategies. As one stakeholder noted, it is difficult to maintain regular staff dedicated to youth outreach without sufficient funding, which hampers the development and sustainability of targeted civic participation programs.

#### *4.3.1.3 Linguistic Barriers*

Language barriers pose significant challenges to civic and political participation in Italy, particularly for TCNs. These barriers affect access not only to citizenship, but also to education, everyday social life, and as a result meaningful civic engagement.

One of the key hurdles for obtaining Italian citizenship is the **linguistic requirement**, which mandates applicants to demonstrate a B1 level of proficiency in Italian. For individuals with migratory backgrounds, especially those with limited access to formal language education, meeting this standard can be a major obstacle to becoming fully integrated members of society and engaging in civic life.

Beyond formal requirements, language barriers also present obstacles in accessing local political initiatives, where communication is often **not adapted for non-native speakers**. International students, in particular, reported facing additional difficulties due to the lack of structured platforms for participation and a perceived **lack of welcome from the host community**, which further discourages civic involvement. Lack of fluency for individuals with migratory backgrounds in general also hinders their everyday life and their ability to engage with people of the host country community and advocate for themselves confidently within their new society.

Recent legislative efforts have focused on improving language support within the education system. A new law in Italy, introduced on July 29<sup>th</sup> 2024, includes measures to promote linguistic integration of migrant youth in primary and secondary schools starting during the 2025-2026 school year (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2024). The law outlines that the Ministry of Education will be able to assign language teachers to classes that consist of at least 20% students with migratory backgrounds (Ibid.). Furthermore, schools with a high percentage of students with migratory backgrounds can receive additional educational resources such as activities during extracurricular hours.



Language barriers can also affect Italian-speaking youth, particularly when it comes to participating in EU-wide initiatives and projects. Many of these opportunities require knowledge of English or other foreign languages, which not all young people possess. In fact, 12% of surveyed youth reported that insufficient foreign language skills were the main reason they did not participate in activities in other EU MSs (European Commission, 2024).

### 4.3.2 Intangible Barriers

Italy's challenges with civic participation extend beyond its structural and economic barriers, encompassing deep intangible barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Despite some progress in recent years, significant gender disparities persist. **Structural discrimination against migrants continues to rise as xenophobia and political polarization takes hold when political figures use divisive language.** These intangible barriers reveal a broader need for inclusive public policies, inclusive approaches, and sustained institutional trust-building to ensure that all citizens can meaningfully participate in Italy's democratic life.

#### 4.3.2.1 Structural Discrimination

In Italy, systemic discrimination against migrants and ethnic minorities is prevalent, particularly in areas like employment, housing, and access to public services. These structural inequalities indirectly, but powerfully, impact their ability to participate in the democratic process. For **young migrants and racialized youth**, these challenges are especially acute, shaping their everyday experiences and long-term civic engagement.

Discrimination in Italy is widespread in the job market, where migrants often experience barriers to employment based on their ethnicity or nationality, particularly affecting women with a migratory background (Fondazione ISMU, 2024). Discrimination in the job market limits economic stability, making it harder for individuals to prioritize civic engagement when they are preoccupied with securing basic needs.

Barriers to adequate housing can lead to residential segregation, isolating communities from civic institutions, information networks, and participatory opportunities such as local meetings, community and youth centers or public consultations. In May 2024, the **Council of Europe's European Committee of Social Rights** found Italy in violation of anti-discrimination principles due to these exact patterns of housing exclusion, against Roma in particular (European Committee of Social Rights, 2023).

Furthermore, unequal access to public services, such as healthcare, education, and language support, exacerbated by the fact that migrants usually live in a prolonged legal limbo in a system like one of Italy exacerbated by systemic delays and inefficiencies, can deepen a sense of marginalization and reinforce the perception that institutions do not represent or serve them. The

LAW/ASGI project (Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione, 2023) documented multiple cases of migrants being denied services or support due to legal and administrative obstacles, including complex residency requirements or a lack of accessible, multilingual information.

Beyond material exclusion, **lack of political representation** and recurring experiences of racial profiling lead to a broader disconnection from institutional life. Many young migrants report feeling unwelcome or invisible within political spaces. This can result in political disengagement, mistrust in public institutions, and a lack of motivation to participate in democratic life, from voting to community organizing. This sense of alienation is exacerbated by the **absence of minority voices in political institutions**, such as the lack of elected Roma representatives in the European Parliament from Italy and the fact that only 37 of the 720 MEPs have a diverse ethnic background (Kroet, 2024).

For many young migrants and racialized individuals, these day-to-day experiences of exclusion compound over time, leading to a broader democratic gap where their voices and concerns are underrepresented or unheard in the political sphere and where they are unable to acquire the political and social capital necessary to participate in democratic processes.

A EP resolution on “Racial justice, non-discrimination and anti-racism in the EU,” of 10 November 2022, points out **how racial discrimination is one of the main causes of limited participation of ethnic minority groups** in democratic processes. This statement is supported by one of the interviewed stakeholders who reported that people of African and Middle-eastern descent perceive the process of integration required by Italian institutions to be riddled with racism.

Migrants who are not yet citizens face significant barriers in accessing civic education programs or political participation opportunities. Such barriers are often compounded by discriminatory attitudes that associate migrants with marginalization or “*otherness*” making it harder for them to participate in mainstream political activities. A study from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights highlights how migrants in Italy, particularly those from non-EU countries, experience a **lack of access to political education and are often excluded from discussions on civic engagement** (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017). This exclusion is due to both **structural inequalities and the societal stigma that migrants face** in a country where citizenship and voting rights are tightly linked to national identity. As such, TCNs are effectively sidelined from broader discussion about policy decisions and democratic processes that affect them directly (Ibid.).

#### 4.3.2.2 Gender

Research suggests that individual pathways to participation differ between males and females, largely influenced by gendered socialization that begins within the family. **Adolescents internalize political norms and roles through observing gender-based labor divisions at**

**home**, where foundational political attitudes often take shape, and also schools, peer groups, and youth organizations play crucial roles (Manganelli, Lucidi, & Alivernini, 2012).

This underscores the importance of increasing female representation and visibility in politics and public life, to provide role models that can challenge traditional gender norms and inspire participation of young women and girls.

While women in Italy show strong civic society engagement (Stefani et al., 2021), their **participation in political decision-making and institutions remains limited**.

Women comprise around one-third of Italy's Parliament, approximately 32.8% of Deputies and 36.3% of Senators (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.). A 2020 study by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2021) found that **women are underrepresented in leadership roles within political and civic organizations**, with only 22% of elected women in regional councils.

This trend reflects broader global patterns. Women hold just 27.7% of national parliamentary seats worldwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). Within the EU, Italy ranked 14th on the 2024 Gender Equality Index with a score of 69.2 (1.8 points below the EU score). Although this marks a 15.9-point improvement since 2010, largely driven by improvements in the power domain (+41.3 points), gender inequality remains a significant challenge. Furthermore, Italy's performance in the labor domain (65.5 points) highlights ongoing disparities, reinforcing the need for sustained efforts to promote women's political and civic participation (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024).

Italy's current goal is to increase its ranking by 5 points by 2026. The main focus areas include creating a fairer labor market, reducing gender pay gaps, ensuring equal opportunities in skills development and in the expression of individual talents in all fields of knowledge, promoting equal sharing of unpaid care, and supporting an equitable gender distribution in top leadership roles (Department for Equal Opportunities, 2021).

In terms of LGBTQIA+ community, numerous studies have highlighted the difficulties that individuals face in accessing political decision-making process, both at the national and European levels. The *Annual Report on the Human Rights of LGBTIQ People*, conducted by ILGA-Europe (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association - European Region) published in 2022, shows how **hostility and violence, legal problems, rigid cultural and social norms are a disincentive to the public and political exposure** of these subjectivities. Threats of violence and social pressure are one of the obstacles, together with discriminatory laws and a lack of comprehensive protection at the macro and micro levels (Ibid.).

Cultural resistance and gender stereotypes remain significant barriers, hindering full participation and representation of women and LGBTQI young people in Italian politics and civic life.

#### 4.3.2.4 EU Perception and Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism seems to have increased in recent years, alongside a rise in feelings of disengagement from local and national politics. According to Flash Eurobarometer 486 (2021), **only 48% of respondents in Italy hold a negative image of the EU**. In general across EU, respondents who completed their education at age 20 or older, those living in financially better-off households and respondents in large towns and cities are more likely to hold a positive image of the EU. Young Europeans aged 26-30 and those with the lowest levels of education are particularly disappointed. Moreover, **25% of respondents in Italy admitted that their image of the EU has got worse** over the previous year.

This is due to several factors, including economic crises and migration flows perceived as being managed ineffectively by the EU, a perceived distance between institutions and everyday life (European Youth Forum, 2019), a **gap between EU policies and the real needs of countries** (Eurobarometer, 2022) and a perceived lack of solidarity among Member States in crisis management.

This reality is clearly reflected in the views expressed during the FGDs. Young people confirmed that the EU is perceived as distant and difficult to understand. As one participant put it:

*"Europe feels more like an abstract concept than a real institution. We don't really know who does what." (ParticipACTION FGD participant)*

For them, **the EU is often seen as a "grey" bureaucracy, disconnected from their reality**. Participants pointed out that the analogy of “*Uncle Gino*”, the uncle who lives back in one’s hometown and that you only see once a year over Christmas, illustrates the sense of disconnection many young Italians feel towards Europe. **The EU seems outdated, distant, and irrelevant to them**, external legislative body with little relevance to daily life, **leading to a lack of motivation to vote in European elections**. Even participants who were relatively well-informed about the roles and functions of EU institutions believed that the EU is disconnected from their everyday lives. Most reported only thinking about it when encountering the EU logo on certain materials or events, suggesting that knowledge does not necessarily translate into a sense of relevance or engagement. Participants also emphasized that there is a lack of direct connection between the Heads of these institutions and the general public, contributing to the perception of the EU as distant or unclear in its actions, and as something that they cannot influence anyhow. Information about the EU, indeed, typically reaches the public filtered through national governments attitudes towards the EU, which can create a disconnect between the EU’s leadership and citizens.

#### 4.3.2.5: Knowledge, Identity, and Civic Involvement

As a result of growing euroscepticism, many young people interviewed and peers tend to identify as Italian first, and – if at all – only secondly as European. **Many TCN youth, in particular, expressed a strong sense of not feeling European, or accepted as part of European society. This is largely because they are not perceived or treated as such,** since they report struggling to feel Italian in the first place, making it even harder for them to develop a sense of European identity. They mentioned that many times their sense of exclusion was closely tied to visible markers of differences, such as skin color or religious expression. One participant shared that wearing a headscarf led to unsolicited comments from teachers about religion, making her feel judged and not ‘truly’ Italian. Another youth mentioned feeling that those with blonde hair and blue eyes are more likely to be recognized as European, whereas individuals with darker complexion are often excluded from this identity. Some participants of African descent felt they were facing an identity crisis, unable to fully relate to either their country of origin or Europe: they described experiencing prejudice and stereotypes from both sides - being seen as "too European" by African people and "too African" by Europeans. TCN participants also mentioned feeling scrutinized or even targeted by authorities due to their background, reinforcing their sense of exclusion.

*"Blonde, blue-eyed people are considered European, but those with darker features are not." (ParticipACTION FGD participant)*

*"If I can't even feel Italian, how can I feel European?" (ParticipACTION FGD participant)*

In the National Roundtables, participants expressed the importance of **bringing visibility to the lived experiences of those with migratory backgrounds in the public discourse**, and the need for a cultural shift towards inclusivity where individuals are open to hearing differing perspectives and can debate respectfully. Participants advocated for the easing of legal restrictions for foreigners in obtaining Italian citizenship and in participating to EU initiatives or projects, emphasizing that it creates a heavy burden that inhibits active participation in a new society.

One notable observation stemming from the FGDs is that **Italian nationals tended to have greater knowledge about the EU and European institutions overall**, but showed **lower levels of political engagement**, with limited involvement in activism or participation. In contrast, TCNs had on average more limited knowledge, yet displayed a deeper sense of political and civic involvement, as certain issues affected them more directly. Overall, participation in social or political matters among the majority of TCN is minimal. Politics is seen as "too big" to engage with, and they fear that they wouldn't be able to make a meaningful contribution. This fear also extends to voting, with some choosing to abstain because they feel there is a **lack of**

**representation.** Participants noted that both cultural background and country of origin significantly influence these dynamics. Levels of participation and the nature of obstacles vary widely among different communities: for example, one participant from the Indian community mentioned how people of Indian descent, as well as individuals from Asian communities, living in Italy tend to be more culturally inward-focused and engage primarily with their own groups, compared to people of other nationalities or cultural descents. This is confirmed also by secondary research: a broader analysis (Gatti, Buonomo & Strozza, 2021) confirms that political engagement among immigrants in Italy varies significantly by country of origin, reflecting cultural, social, and structural differences.

#### *4.3.2.6: Mistrust in Public Institutions and Psychological Barriers*

One key obstacle to political participation among young people that emerged from FGDs is a widespread indifference and political polarization, driven by a belief that decisions are made by powerful elites and that censorship, particularly on social media, limits genuine discussion. Participants noted a lack of political education, with misinformation and ignorance purportedly used to maintain control. Social structures, including families, often neglect civic education.

**Young people in Italy express some frustration with the political system, particularly with how long-term change can be slow and often hindered by government inaction or shifting priorities.** This shows the tension between personal agency and the broader political structures that may not always support the goals they are working toward.

*"Decisions are made at the top, by experts, while ordinary people, especially young ones, are not given a say." (ParticipACTION FGD participant)*

Participants expressed a general sense of mistrust toward politicians and the political system. There was a shared belief that decisions are made by a small group of powerful individuals and that bottom-up actions have limited impact. This perception contributes to a sense of powerlessness and discourages engagement. This is confirmed by the desk research: in Italy, about **one in four young people (24%)** believe that the world's most important decisions are controlled by **a small and secret group of individuals**. Only **12%** of Italian youth report being **very or completely satisfied** with how democracy functions in their country. Approximately **37%** say they have **little or no trust in national politicians**, while just **15%** express **strong or complete trust in the European Parliament** (Rapporto Italia Generativa, 2023).

One stakeholder interview indicated that when opportunities are readily available, young people do engage with local policymakers. However, they often feel that their efforts do not lead to visible outcomes. This lack of clear impact can be harmful, as it may reinforce feelings of indifference and discourage continued civic involvement.

*"If there once was hope to change things with your own ideas, that hope no longer exists."*  
(ParticipACTION FGD participant)



This widespread distrust is compounded by growing political polarisation. FGDs participants have reported that they feel as if public debate has become increasingly confrontational and with divisions based on group identity. As one participant put it, *"people just talk, but without the openness to reconsider their positions."* Participants in the FGDs have described how this widespread indifference and political polarization can create space for the rise of populism in illiberal forms. When young people feel excluded from decision-making processes and distrustful of established political institutions, they may become susceptible to political narratives that promise to return power to "the people" while vilifying elites, minorities, or external actors, such as the EU. In the absence of a strong civic education and inclusive spaces for political dialogue, these narratives can go unchallenged, especially in online spaces where misinformation spreads quickly, as demonstrated by DEMOS European study (2022) that found that **students with stronger civic education are less likely to adopt populist attitudes**. As populist rhetoric grows, it often undermines democratic norms by delegitimizing dissent and concentrating power in the hands of charismatic leaders. In Italy, this trend is increasingly visible in the framing of national identity, immigration, and sovereignty, where populist parties capitalize on the youth frustrations. As a result, youth may shift from democratic apathy (disinterest in institutions) to democratic antipathy (active rejection of liberal democracy) (Foa & Mounk, 2019).

Additional barriers to youth civic participation may include limited time to **engage in active citizenship feelings of 'relational loneliness'**, transportation barriers hindering access to venues and events. In particular, limited time was mentioned as the main reason for not participating in the activities of civic organisations, by 35% of total respondents to the Eurobarometer, especially among those aged 19-24 (European Commission, 2022).

*"Indifference is born from loneliness and the lack of opportunities for dialogue."  
(ParticipACTION FGD participant)*

## Cross-cutting themes

Several recurring themes emerged that cut across the different sources of this National Level Assessment Report. These cross-cutting issues illuminate the complex and interconnected challenges that young people, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, face in accessing civic and political life in Italy and Europe.

A recurring issue was the limited and fragmented understanding of the European Union and its institutions. Many young people, especially those from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds, lack access to clear, youth-friendly information about the EU's functions, rights, and opportunities. Civic education, when available, is often inconsistent and formal, missing chances to build critical and inclusive EU awareness.

Many youth, especially those with a migratory background, expressed a persistent sense of exclusion from both national and European identities. For TCN youth, the difficulty in identifying

with a broader European identity is often rooted in the struggle to be recognized as citizens in their countries of residence. Widespread distrust in institutions, perceived inefficacy of democratic processes, and limited civic education contribute to a worrying trend of disengagement.

Young people often report feeling that political discourse lacks ideological clarity and that opportunities for genuine dialogue are scarce. A recurring demand from participants was for youth voices to be taken seriously in shaping policies that affect them. Young people emphasized the importance of participatory mechanisms that move beyond consultation, with special attention being paid to including underrepresented groups, such as TCNs and LGBTQI+ youth, in co-design processes, ensuring that civic and political engagement is both inclusive and empowering.

Amid declining trust in institutions, many young people are shifting their focus from formal political participation (such as voting or party membership) to more informal, issue-based, and community-driven engagement. Forms of expression such as online activism, volunteering, local organizing, and creative initiatives are increasingly seen as more effective, accessible, and authentic channels for making a difference. However, these informal efforts often lack institutional support or recognition.

## 5. Focus Areas and Solutions

### 5.1 Youth Proposals to foster solidarity and civic participation

Respondents to the ParticipACTION survey recommended several actions to promote civic and political participation among young people in the EU and Italy:

- More opportunities of civic education at all school levels - supported by 55% of respondents
- More cultural events or festivals - supported by 48%
- Increased funding for local engagement activities - supported by 40%
- Greater protection of the right to protest - supported by 27%
- More effective social media campaign – supported by 21%
- Broad voting eligibility – supported by 12%

Moreover, throughout the implementation of project activities, participants were given the opportunity to discuss potential solutions to their concerns and share ideas to better support young people in Italy, particularly TCN youth and young women.

The following recommendations, aiming at enhancing solidarity and civic engagement within the European context, emerged from the discussions held with youth during the FGDs, seminar, and roundtable:

**1. Strengthen and expand civic and political education to foster informed and active citizenship**

Comprehensive civic education should be strengthened in schools and universities to help young people better understand political systems and their role in society. To be truly effective, **civic education must follow a well-structured curriculum** that responds to the specific needs and knowledge gaps of students, rather than being left to the discretion of individual educators, who are often already overburdened with other responsibilities. Introducing mandatory volunteering programs can foster civic responsibility, while teaching the real-life impact of European politics will make EU affairs more relevant. Media literacy must be promoted **through popular channels** to help youth critically engage with information. To ensure accessibility, resources should be regularly updated online and presented through user-friendly interfaces that keep up with the rapid evolution of communication tools, particularly on platforms such as university websites, municipal initiative pages, and other institutional channels frequently accessed by young people.

**2. Increase support for youth engagement and empowerment by providing platforms and resources for active participation**

Youth-led initiatives and peer engagement in areas like culture, sports, and education should receive more support. Institutions need to **actively back young voices in political spaces**, creating genuine opportunities for youth to be involved in decision-making processes. Empowering young people to participate meaningfully can help close the gap between youth and politics. Beyond providing platforms for young people to express themselves, it is essential for local institutions and governments to implement their ideas and showcase the positive outcomes of their involvement. Highlighting successful youth-driven projects not only validates their contributions but also inspires broader participation and reinforces the value of their role in shaping society. Additionally, fostering open dialogue between students and political representatives and emphasizing diverse community identities will encourage greater participation.

**3. Improve media and communication approaches to ensure transparent, accessible, and youth-friendly information delivery**

Governments and institutions should **provide transparent, accessible information through channels favored by young people**, such as social media and digital platforms. Leveraging influencers and modern media can increase political awareness and trust among youth, encouraging ongoing civic engagement.

4. **Promote greater inclusivity and accessibility in civic and political spaces to reflect the diversity of youth populations**  
Creating **accessible platforms for international students and marginalized groups** is essential for inclusive participation. Increased funding for education, especially in underserved areas, and clearer information about EU institutions and voting can help reduce barriers. Language accessibility also plays a crucial role, as many individuals who struggle with the local language may face years of delay before they can fully understand and actively engage, leading to long-term disengagement. Providing translations, at least in widely spoken languages such as English, is key to ensuring **broader accessibility and fostering meaningful participation**. Building a more open political environment ensures all youth feel represented and motivated to engage.

*"Knowledge is the most powerful weapon." (ParticipACTION FGD Participant)*

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of the data collected through the various phases of research highlights a deep **disconnection between Italian youth and European institutions**, which manifests itself in the form of gaps in knowledge, a perceived distance, and subsequently limited participation. Most young people demonstrate a **superficial or fragmented knowledge** of the functioning of the EU, its institutions, its founding values and opportunities for civic participation. In addition, there are structural and social barriers including the lack of effective civic education, poorly accessible communication, systemic discrimination of marginalised communities and identities, and a widespread sense of distrust towards politics.

Young people, especially those with a migratory background, often **do not feel represented** at the national or European level, struggle to identify themselves as European and encounter practical obstacles to obtain citizenship. Despite this, some positive signs emerge: many young people, especially TCNs, are **active in volunteering, follow social issues with interest through social media and recognize the importance of personal commitment**, even in everyday gestures.

The gap between young people and institutions is not only a problem of information, but also of trust, belonging and accessibility. However, the focus groups also highlighted a strong demand for **concrete tools to bridge this gap**: more structured, inclusive and practical civic education; more direct, transparent and accessible institutional communication; safe spaces for political debate and dialogue; and the promotion of initiatives led by young people themselves.

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# Annex 1: Desk Research Questions

## 1. Knowledge

- What are the documented levels of awareness among the target audience regarding EU institutions, policies, legislation, and strategies?
- Are there any documented gaps in young persons' knowledge of national and EU processes?
  - Are the gaps in knowledge cross-cutting, or is there any documented relationship that emerges between specific identities (i.e. gender, socio-economic background, migratory background, etc) and levels of awareness and knowledge (or lack thereof) of political, civic, and solidarity mechanism at the national and/or EU levels?
- What is the current climate regarding Euroscepticism, particularly among young people?

## 2. Participation

- What is the level of youth political and civic participation in the country? Does this level vary between national processes and EU processes? Consider activities such as voting, candidacy, holding office, campaigning, political membership, protests, boycotts, and involvement in policy making.
- Are there any national policy documents and action plans related to youth democratic participation and political engagement? Include specific records related to the involvement of young TCNs and women and girls.
- Identify any national bodies that focus on youth democratic participation.

## 3. Barriers

- Are any laws, regulations, or policies supporting or hindering TCN's participation in civic democratic life?
- Identify practical (non-legal) barriers, such as racism, xenophobia, racial profiling, gendered expectations, and socio-economic obstacles. Are there any stereotypes correlated with political and civic participation (or lack thereof)?
- Are any groups particularly discouraged from engaging in public life due to stereotypes and expectations (i.e. gendered expectations of "calm/nurturing" rather than assertive behavior for women, migrants and stereotypes of being "unqualified" or "uncooperative", young people and the stereotype of "political apathy")?

## Annex 2: Survey Questions

### Demographic Questions

- **What is your age?**
  - Between 16 and 19 years old
  - Between 20 and 23 years old
- **What gender do you identify as?**
  - Female
  - Male
  - Non-Binary
  - Other: \_\_\_\_
  - Prefer Not to Say
- **What is your country of residence (i.e., In what country do you live?)**
- **What is your country of origin?**

### Knowledge Questions

**1. Which of the following European Union institutions, opportunities and policies are you familiar with? By “know” we mean that you feel you can describe their role, functions, or content with some confidence. Options Include:**

- European Commission
- European Parliament
- EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027/European Youth Goals
- Erasmus+
- European Solidarity Corps
- Council of Europe
- Court of Justice of the European Union
- European Court of Human Rights
- None of these/Unsure

### Answer Selection Key (Along with Listing Which Institutions, Opportunities, and Policies)

- I don't know of any
- I know one
- I know of two
- I know of three
- I know four of them
- I know five of them
- I know six of them

- I know seven of them
- I know eight of them

**2. Listed below are some ways to participate in EU activities. Which, if any, are you familiar with? Options Include:**

- Petitions to the European Parliament
- Opportunities to visit the European Parliament
- Events organized by the European Parliament Liaison Office
- European Youth Event (EYE) / EYE Online
- Online events or activities organized by together.eu
- Charlemagne Youth Prize
- Euroscola

**Answer Selection Key (Along with Listing Which EU Activities)**

- I don't know of any
- I know one
- I know of two
- I know of three
- I know four of them

**3. Do you know how the president of the European Commission or the European Parliament are appointed?**

- Yes
- No
- Partially

**4. Do you know the six core values of the European Union?**

- Yes
- No
- Some

**If you answered “Yes” or “Some,” try pointing to some of them**

- Answers that include *human dignity*
- Answers that include *freedom*
- Answers that include *democracy*
- Answers that include *equality*
- Answers that include *rule or law*
- Answers that include *human rights*

**5. Are you familiar with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights?**



- Yes
- No
- Partially

## Open-Ended Questions

6. Are you aware of recent EU developments, policies or decisions related to migration? How do they impact your national/local context?
7. Are you familiar with EU initiatives, policies, or plans to promote Education, Culture, Youth and Sports? What impact do they have in your national/local context?
8. How do you think the EU or your state can promote the civic and political participation of young people (EU and non-EU citizens) at the local, national and European level?
9. In your opinion, how could your country or the EU support you in expressing acts of solidarity with the most vulnerable people in your daily life?
10. On a scale of 1 to 5, do you think there are enough online opportunities to participate in civic and political actions in the EU?
11. Indicate the activities in which you participated in the past year (12 months). If you did, who or what inspired you to get involved civically or politically in your community or to express solidarity with others?