

## IMPACT OF ERASMUS+ YOUTH EXCHANGES ON THE CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *There are numerous studies aimed to examine the socio-economic factors, motivation and youth backgrounds impacting youth civic participation collected by qualitative questionnaires. Simultaneously, there is an empirical literature gap in the examination of youth exchanges and economic country specifications (GDP per capita, youth employment, youth unemployment, expenditures on health, education, R&D, etc.) and their impact on civil society participation index. The aim of this research paper is to: 1) examine the theoretical assumptions of the impact of Erasmus+ youth exchanges on the civil society participation index in the European countries, 2) examine other factors which impact civil society participation index as youth employment, expenditures on education and research and development, GDP per capita, and others. Based on this aim, there is created following research question: Does Erasmus youth exchanges impact civil society participation in the European countries? Which are the other factors which impact it? This research paper will examine the panel data which will be created from cross-sectional data (economic characteristics of EU countries) and timeline series (their values among the years 2015-2020) via OLS regression. Data to be used in this research paper will be collected from Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance about Civil society participation index and other economic factors related to the EU countries participating in the Erasmus+ youth exchanges will be downloaded from EUROSTAT. These data will be connected to Erasmus+ youth exchanges data got from Erasmus+ dissemination platform. The findings of this research paper will provide information about the impact of Erasmus+ youth exchanges and other economic factors in civic participation. Results will show how all these factors influence the willingness of people to participate in civic society.*

**Keywords:** *Erasmus+ youth exchanges, macroeconomic factors, civic participation*

**JEL Classification:** H52, J11, N14

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## 1 Introduction

Enhancing young people's active citizenship was stressed as one of the challenges of the Erasmus + Programme, and the promotion of active citizenship was listed among its specific objectives as to improve the level of key competences and skills of young people, including those with fewer opportunities, as well as to promote participation in democratic life in Europe and the labour market, active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, social inclusion and solidarity, in particular through increased learning mobility opportunities for young people, those active in youth work or youth organisations and youth leaders, and through strengthened links between the youth field and the labour market (European Commission, 2015a). The simplest form of civic engagement is attending a candidate forum and learning what the candidate stands for (Cnaan & Park, 2016). Today civic education is taught extensively in Europe, as in the context of formal educational system, also in the non-formal system, aiming to encourage an active and responsible citizenship in modern democracy (Lutaj, 2014). Young people became aware of being active members of society; they enhanced their civic responsibility and gained more awareness about the opportunity to take an active part in the policy-making process (Romanovska, 2021). Young people and individuals in vulnerable economic conditions are more likely to suffer the negative consequences of economic downturns, therefore as a result, we argue that they are the most likely to become mobilized during bad economic times (Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2019).

Due to these reasons young people tend to look for opportunities provided not only on country level, but also at the level of European union, if taken into consideration only EU countries. There are opportunities to improve soft skills, gain volunteering experience and increase chances for a better life. Erasmus+ Programme offers gaining these experiences abroad, also in the home country through student exchange mobilities for students or voluntary service, trainings, workshops which are included in the youth exchange program on which is focused this research paper.

As most of the studies are aimed to examine the socio-economic factors, motivation and youth backgrounds impacting youth civic participation collected by qualitative questionnaires. Related to the Erasmus+ Programme, there are studies which examine students' mobilities, but no youth exchanges and their impact on civic participation. There is a gap in the examination of

youth exchanges and economic country specifications (GDP per capita, youth employment, expenditures on health, education, R&D, etc.) and their impact on civil society participation index.

The aim of this research paper is to: (1) examine the theoretical assumptions of the impact of Erasmus+ youth exchanges on the civil society participation index in the European countries, (2) examine other factors which impact civic participation such as youth employment, expenditures on education, health, research and development, GDP per capita, and others.

## **2 Youth population and other factors impacting the civil society participation**

Civil Society Participation denotes the extent to which organized, voluntary, self-generating and autonomous social life is institutionally possible (Tufis, 2023). The literature on civic participation/engagement (also known as pro-social behavior) predominately focuses on three pillars:1 (1) giving and volunteering; (2) political engagement; and (3) environment-friendly behaviors (Cnaan & Park, 2016). Service learning involves educational institutions (mostly high schools and universities) that encourage or even require students to volunteer off-campus for a group or a cause (Cnaan & Park, 2016). Active citizenship is not a particular status that requires certain skills and competencies; it has to do with the ability of each citizen to defend his rights and exercise responsibilities in the development of public policies in function of common goods (Lutaj, 2014).

Participation in organized activities is a common developmental experience for young people (Mahoney, Harris & Eccles, 2006). Researchers into participation believe that self-organization and purposeful engagement in various associations is an essential path to the development of participation (Barnes, 2006). The finding that Erasmus study increases participants' interests in these various aspects of Europe supports the assumption that Erasmus participation leads to attitudinal change; because of the cultural interaction presumed to be at the heart of a foreign study sojourn, Erasmus participation has often been characterized as a civic experience (Mitchell, 2012).

Governments make thousands of decisions that affect individual welfare; citizens have only one instrument to control these decisions: the vote (Przeworski, Stokes & Manin, 1999). Pacek, Pop-Eleches & Tucker (2009)

show that turnout in post-Communist countries is lower when unemployment rates are higher (a “demobilizing” effect), while Panagopoulos (2008) reports that turnout in countries with compulsory voting systems is higher when GDP growth is lower (a “mobilizing” effect). An economic downturn can have a mobilizing or a demobilizing effect depending on its impact on citizens’ motivation to participate in the elections; at the country level, the non-conditional model suggests that the degree of democracy and GDP per capita are not strong predictors of individual willingness to vote (Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2019).

While it is important to keep expectations realistic, international experience does demonstrate many positive links between participation and the creation of governance conditions favorable to sound macroeconomic policy, growth, and eventual improvements in living standards among the poor (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2003). New connections between government and citizens may lead to more accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to a wider range of societal groups (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2003). On the civil society side, important outcomes include: increased trust in government, increased willingness to work with government, increased social capital, and increased civil society capacity (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2003). The level and growth of national income are significant for civil society participation: a faster growing and richer productive system means more resources to distribute to secure the support and compliance of all groups in society (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2003).

It is obviously more of a challenge to obtain consent on macroeconomic policy issues when the economic pie is frozen or shrinking, which may encourage zero-sum competition and a “winner-take-all” mentality among rival interest groups. (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2003). While social capital theory generally emphasizes the beneficial role of social networks for society (e.g., Putnam, 1993; see, however, critical discussions in Levi, 1996; Foley & Edwards, 1998; Zmerli, 2009) – thus predicting lower corruption with increasing civic engagement – research on interest-group politics (e.g., Olson, 1965, 1982; Grossman & Helpman, 2001) generates the reverse prediction (Griesshaber & Geys, 2011).

Education contributes to the formation of skills and orientation facilitating an engagement in politics, and it is found to be associated with antecedents of participation, such as political knowledge, interest, and efficacy (Quaranta, 2018).

### 3 Methodology

As education, intercultural experiences through social interaction are important factors, which are included in the aims of the Erasmus+ youth exchange programme. The policy setup is not only important to be written but also examined through evaluation. Therefore, this research paper is to analyze the impact of Erasmus+ youth exchanges on civil society participation.

Based on the aim of research paper, the following research questions were formulated: (1) Does Erasmus youth exchanges affect or have impact civic participation in the European countries? (2) Which are the other factors which affect it?

Then, there are two hypotheses set up:

(1) H0: Erasmus+ youth exchanges have an impact on the Civil society participation index.

HA: Erasmus+ youth exchanges does not have impact on the Civil society participation index.

(2) H0: There are other factors impacting the civil society participation index.

HA: There are no other factors impacting the civil society participation index.

#### 3.1 Selection of data

This research paper analyses the relationship between the civil society participation and Erasmus+ youth exchanges and other factors by combining data from Erasmus+ database, Eurostat and Civil Society Participation index from Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance for the period 2015 – 2021 for 27 European countries.

The dependent variable in analysis is Civil Society Participation index. Data are taken from Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance which are available for all European countries for the chosen period 2015-2021. The Civil Society Participation index has a scale range from 0 (lowest score) to 1 (highest score). The measurement of Civil Society Participation relies on six indicators - three of these are V-Dem indicators based on expert surveys that consider the extent to which the legal and political context supports civil society organizations and activities (Tufis, 2023). To these we have added indicators

of the strength of interest groups and social capital, and the infrastructurally-focused e-Participation (Tufis, 2023).

Minimum values of the Civil Society Participation index (values under 0.50) are in Hungary, Romania, Poland. In the last observed year 2021, the smallest values (under 0.60) are in Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Maximum values of the Civil Society Participation index (values above 0.85) are in Denmark, Norway, Ireland, Sweden, Finland. Last observed year 2021, there are values above 0.80 in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Finland, Iceland.

The independent variable will be created as a share of youth exchanges participants on the total youth population. The total numbers of participants in youth exchange mobilities are used which are available in the Erasmus+ annual report – statistical annex for the periods 2015-2021. Erasmus+ youth mobilities are part of the calls which are signed as KA104. Under Erasmus+ youth mobilities there are also non-European countries included. Due to this, only EU countries are selected.

The second portion of the data is also necessary to download, i.e. data from Eurostat about the total number of youth population (age 15-34) among countries for the period of 2015-2021. This age range was changed due to possibilities of participation in the youth exchanges. There is a need to divide numbers of youth exchange participants with total youth population to get a share of young people in the population on Erasmus+ youth exchanges.

As control variables the data which contain details about country specifics are downloaded from Eurostat. Based on these data there is possible to identify other factors impacting the Civil Society Participation index. Based on the literature review, there are chosen and shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Dependent and independent variables overview used in the analysis

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Unit of measure</b>
Civil society participation	Constructed index
Youth participation on Erasmus+ youth exchanges	Ratio
Death due to drugs dependence	Rate
Corruption Perception Index	Number
Education - Total government expenditure	Percentage of GDP
Environmental protection - Total government expenditure	Percentage of GDP
Culture, recreation, and religion - Total government expenditure	Percentage of GDP
Health - Total government expenditure	Percentage GDP
Social protection - Total government expenditure	Percentage of GDP
Research and development - All sectors expenditure	Percentage of GDP
Real GDP per capita	Euro per capita
HICP - inflation rate	Annual average rate of change
Gender employment gap	Percentage of total population
People at risk of poverty or social exclusion	Percentage
Digital exclusion - Internet use: never	Percentage of individuals
Individuals who have basic or above basic overall digital skills	Percentage of individuals
Trade openness	Share of exports and imports in GDP

**Source:** own processing

Trade openness data are not available on Eurostat. They are available on the Oxford University platform – Our world data from which the data about European countries openness were downloaded. As all data is collected, the next step is to load all databases into one database and clean if needed.

Due to missing data about countries which are participating in Erasmus+ youth exchanges in Eurostat, or another database, there were extracted Lichtenstein, United Kingdom, North Macedonia, Serbia. In this analysis, 27 European countries are involved.

### 3.2 Selection of empirical model

The independent variable and control variables measure the characteristics of different levels of analysis – socioeconomic data and macroeconomics country data. Therefore, the research paper uses the multilevel model for  $i$  youth exchanges participants from  $j$  countries with  $k$  chosen country details in the period 2015-2021:

$$Y_{ijk} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \cdot \text{youth\_particip}_{jk} + \gamma_i \cdot Z_{jk} + \epsilon_{jk} \quad (1)$$

$\gamma_0$  – constant of the model,

$Z_{jk}$  – other controlled variables in the model,

$\epsilon_{jk}$  – errors of the model.

After data load, it is necessary to choose the proper method. There are cross-sectional data available, combined with timeline data about countries. Therefore, it is necessary to do the Breusch – Pagan Lagranger Multiplier to identify whether there are significant differences across units in the data, if necessary to use the panel data analysis. When the  $p$  - value of the LM test is zero, it means it is significant, which rejects the null hypothesis, that there are no variances across entities equals zero. Therefore, we need to perform panel data analysis.

In the next step, it is necessary to identify which panel data analysis is more suitable instead of a classic OLS regression – fixed effect model or random effect model. As all data are time-variant, it is assumed that random effects model is more consistent. To identify this hypothesis, the authors performed fixed effects regression, random effects regression and Hausman test. The  $p$ -value of the Hausman test is 0.4129 which is higher than 0.05, so we can accept hypothesis that for this analysis is more suitable to use random effects model.



#### 4 Erasmus+ Youth exchanges and other factors affecting the Civil society participation index

Results of the OLS regression using random effects model show that youth participation on Erasmus+ youth exchanges has impact on the Civil Society Participation index. There is a positive relationship between dependent and independent variables. In the regression model, the data of 27 countries are used to analyze their country specifics and their impact on the civil society participation index for the period of years 2015-2021.

Random effect regression model is properly setup which is confirmed by p-value equaling zero. Random effect model provides information that differences among country specifics during the chosen period is not that big. However, there are big differences among countries which are stated in the R-squared – amounting to 0.8355. Assumption of the random effect model that the between entity errors  $\varepsilon_i$  are uncorrelated with the regressors in this model (correlation equals zero) (Baum, 2006).

Significant variables (p-value lower than 0.05) for which it is necessary to reject the hypothesis that there are other factors impacting the civil society participation index are research and development expenditures, GDP per capita, digital exclusion and trade openness.

**Table 2:** Erasmus+ youth exchanges and other factors impacting the civil society participation index among chosen EU countries in the period 2015-2021

VARIABLES	RE
Youth participation on Erasmus+ youth exchanges	0.00386 (0.00360)
Youth employment	-0.00108 (0.00162)
Corruption index	0.00158 (0.00122)
Drug death	-0.0144 (0.0221)
Education exp.	0.000821 (0.0118)

Environment exp.	-0.00873 (0.0215)
Culture & Recreation exp	-0.0105 (0.0177)
Health exp.	-0.00911 (0.00879)
Social protection exp.	0.00173 (0.00444)
R&D exp.	0.0542** (0.0216)
GDP per capita	5.41e-06*** (1.22e-06)
Inflation index	-0.000393 (0.00328)
Gender employment gap	0.000853 (0.00214)
Social exclusion	0.000226 (0.00180)
Digital exclusion	0.00267* (0.00153)
Digital skills	-0.000174 (0.000383)
Trade openness	-0.000509* (0.000265)
Constant	0.482*** (0.162)
Observations	107
Number of countries	27

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

Source: own processing

Other control variables have p-value higher than 0.05 based on which the null hypothesis is valid that there are other factors impacting the civil society participation index. The positive relationship of corruption index, education

expenditures, social protection expenditures, gender employment gap, social exclusion is confirmed by random effect model. A higher corruption index means lower corruption in the country, so a higher corruption index increases the civil society participation index. If education or social protection expenditures increase by one percent, it causes a one percent increase in the civil society participation index.

The negative relationship is visible in the control variables, such as youth employment, drug death, environment protection, culture and recreation, health expenditures, inflation rate and level of digital skills.

## 5 Conclusion

Young people and individuals in vulnerable economic conditions are more likely to suffer the negative consequences of economic downturns, therefore as a result, we argue that they are the most likely to become mobilized during bad economic times (Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2019). There are opportunities to improve soft skills, gain volunteering experience and increase chances for a better life. Erasmus+ programme offers gaining these experiences abroad and in the home country through student exchange mobilities for students or voluntary service, trainings, workshops which are included in the youth exchange program on which was focused this research paper.

There was a gap in the examination of youth exchanges and economic country specifications (GDP per capita, youth employment, expenditures on health, education, R&D, etc.) and their impact on civil society participation index.

This research paper analysed the relationship between the civil society participation and Erasmus+ youth exchanges and other factors by combining data from Erasmus+ database, Eurostat and Civil Society Participation index from Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance for the period 2015 – 2021 for 27 European countries.

The dependent variable in the analysis was set up the Civil Society Participation index. As an independent variable of the youth exchanges participation as a share of youth exchange participants in total youth population. As control variables are used the data as death due to drugs dependence, corruption perception index, education, environmental protection, culture, recreation, and religion, health, social protection as total government expenditure,

research and development expenditure, real GDP per capita, HICP - inflation rate, gender employment gap, people at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate, digital exclusion rate, individuals who have basic or above basic overall digital skills, trade openness.

Results from the OLS regression using random effects model show that participation on youth exchanges impacting the civil society participation index. There is a positive relationship between dependent and independent variables. Factors such as research and development expenditures, GDP per capita, digital exclusion and trade openness do not have impact on the civil society participation index. Regarding other factors, there is a positive relationship of corruption index, education expenditures, social protection expenditures, gender employment gap, social exclusion. On the other hand, there is negative relationship of youth employment, drug death, environment protection, culture and recreation, health expenditures, inflation rate and level of digital skills on the civil society participation index.

Based on the results, there is a possible challenge for next research to examine if there is a similar impact of Erasmus+ student mobilities on the civil society participation.

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