YCEE Youth in Central and Eastern Europe

30-10-2026
ISSN 2720-4049

Received: 10.10.2026 Revised: 10.10.2026 Accepted: 12.10.2026 Available: 15.10.2026

Matteo Bartolini

mtt.bartolini@gmail.com

FROM CIVIC LONELINESS TO PARTICIPATION ECOSYSTEMS: RETHINKING YOUTH AGENCY IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE AFTER DIAGNOZA MŁODZIEŻY 2026

DOI: 10.24917/ycee.13109

1. Introduction

Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026 is useful because it does not reduce the condition of young people to a single indicator or policy domain. It brings together evidence on family life, health, education, work, material independence, the digital ecosystem and civic engagement, combining a synthesis of more than 200 studies from 2020–2025 with the project's own research (Polskie Towarzystwo Polityki Społecznej [PTPS], 2026). Across these domains, one finding is especially important for youth-policy research: young people may be present in public debate, connected to information and willing to express views while still experiencing little sense that institutions respond to them. The report captures this tension with the language of declining agency and "civic loneliness."

The diagnosis is not simply that young people are disengaged. The report instead describes an asymmetry between willingness to influence public life and confidence that available channels are consequential. Among 15–18-year-olds, 63% report little sense of influence over local or school matters and 31% report no influence at all; elsewhere the report notes that only about one in five young people believes that their needs are realistically taken into account in public decision-making (PTPS, 2026, pp. 15, 296). At the same time, engagement is increasingly mediated through digital platforms, where expression is immediate but the path from expression to institutional response is often opaque.

This commentary proposes a specific reading of that tension. The most useful analytical question is not whether youth participation is moving "from offline to online," nor whether digital participation is intrinsically weaker than conventional participation. It is whether the wider participation ecosystem converts access and expression into audience, feedback and influence. That distinction matters for interpreting the report, for evaluating youth-participation

Bartolini M. (2026). From Civic Loneliness to Participation Ecosystems: Rethinking Youth Agency in the Digital Public Sphere after Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe*. 30-10-2026. https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.13109

mechanisms, and for designing future research on political efficacy and trust.

2. Civic loneliness as a problem of agency, not simply participation

The notion of civic loneliness is valuable because it shifts attention away from a behavioural deficit model. Low participation can be interpreted too easily as indifference, apathy or lack of civic competence. The evidence assembled in Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026 points to a more relational problem: young people may have opinions and participate episodically, yet doubt that institutions are receptive to them. In this sense, civic loneliness describes a gap between being politically or socially expressive and experiencing oneself as a recognised participant in collective decision-making.

This interpretation is consistent with comparative evidence on political agency. The OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions shows a strong association between perceived political voice and institutional trust. Across surveyed OECD countries, trust in national government is far higher among people who feel they have a say in what government does than among those who feel they do not (OECD, 2024b). The direction of causality is not simple: trust can encourage participation, while responsive participation can also reinforce trust. Nonetheless, the relationship underlines why efficacy should be treated as more than an individual attitude. It is partly produced by institutional experience.

For youth research, this suggests distinguishing between internal political efficacy—confidence in one's own capacity to understand and engage—and external political efficacy—the belief that institutions are responsive to citizens' demands. Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026 contains evidence relevant to both, but the strongest concern appears to lie in the second dimension. Young people's critical evaluations of institutions coexist with selective, episodic and often reactive engagement (PTPS, 2026). Seen in this way, the central problem is not an absence of voice but uncertainty about where that voice goes.

3. Digital participation is not simply displaced participation

The report's chapter on the digital ecosystem correctly presents digitalisation as ambivalent. Digital environments provide rapid access to information and educational resources, sustain peer and interest-based communities, enable identity expression, and lower the coordination costs of mobilisation around social issues. The same environments expose young people to information overload, fear of missing out, cyberviolence, disinformation, algorithmic manipulation and AI-generated content (PTPS, 2026). These opportunities and risks are not peripheral to civic engagement: they increasingly shape how young people encounter public issues, form views and coordinate action.

It would therefore be misleading to interpret the migration of some civic activity online as evidence of a straightforward retreat from "real" participation. A meta-analysis by Boulianne and Theocharis (2020), covering more than one hundred studies, found that politically oriented digital-media use is generally positively associated with offline political activity. Their findings provide little support for a blanket claim that online engagement displaces offline engagement. Oser and Boulianne (2020), drawing on repeated-wave panel evidence, also show that the relationship can involve reinforcement: people who are already politically engaged are more likely to use digital media politically, and those practices can become part of a durable repertoire of participation. This cautions against both technological optimism and the dismissive label of "slacktivism."

Recent European survey data similarly show mixed repertoires rather than mutually exclusive

Bartolini M. (2026). From Civic Loneliness to Participation Ecosystems: Rethinking Youth Agency in the Digital Public Sphere after Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe*. 30-10-2026. https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.13109

channels. In the 2024 EU Youth Survey, among more than 25,000 respondents aged 16–30, voting was the most commonly reported form of engagement (39%), but petitions (26%), volunteering (20%), posting political or social opinions online (19%), and politically or ethically motivated consumer choices (19%) all formed part of the same landscape. Instagram, TikTok and YouTube were also leading sources of political information (European Commission, 2025). The relevant unit of analysis is therefore increasingly a hybrid repertoire that moves between digital expression, interpersonal networks, organisations and formal institutions.

The risk identified in Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026 is less that online engagement is inherently superficial than that digital environments can amplify expression without ensuring that institutions receive that expression or are accountable for their response. Platforms are exceptionally effective at making speech visible to peers and exceptionally weak at clarifying whether a public institution has heard, considered or acted upon that speech. When institutions invite participation through consultations, social media, youth councils or surveys but do not close the feedback loop, digital abundance can coexist with civic loneliness.

4. From participation channels to participation ecosystems

A participation-ecosystem perspective provides a way to connect these findings. The Council of Europe's 2026 European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life defines participation in terms that go beyond attendance or consultation: young people need the right, means, space, opportunities, tools and support necessary to participate and influence decisions (Council of Europe, 2026). This is compatible with Lundy's (2007) influential interpretation of participation rights through four linked elements—space, voice, audience and influence. The important conceptual move is from counting opportunities to examining the chain through which participation becomes consequential.

In light of the findings of Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026, such an ecosystem can be analysed along five dimensions. First, access asks whether young people can enter a process and whether barriers differ by geography, education, disability, socioeconomic status or other forms of disadvantage. Second, voice concerns whether they can formulate and express views in formats that are meaningful to them, including digital and non-formal formats. Third, audience concerns whether a person or institution with relevant responsibility actually receives and considers those views. Fourth, influence concerns whether the contribution can affect agendas, choices or implementation, without assuming that participation requires every proposal to be accepted. Fifth, institutional response concerns traceability: whether participants can find out what happened after they contributed, what was accepted or rejected, and why.

These dimensions help explain why a participation mechanism can be technically open yet experienced as ineffective. A consultation may score highly on access and voice but poorly on audience and response. A youth council may have a formally designated audience but limited influence over relevant decisions. A social-media campaign may produce extensive peer visibility yet no institutional interface. Conversely, a small local process may involve few participants but provide a clear decision pathway and transparent feedback. Treating all these activities as equivalent instances of "participation" can obscure the mechanisms that produce or undermine political efficacy.

The ecosystem concept also makes the online/offline distinction less central. What matters is the connection between spaces. A digital platform can be a meaningful participation instrument if it is linked to a defined decision-making process, accessible to diverse young people, moderated in ways that protect deliberation, and accompanied by transparent institutional feedback. An

Bartolini M. (2026). From Civic Loneliness to Participation Ecosystems: Rethinking Youth Agency in the Digital Public Sphere after Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe*. 30-10-2026. https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.13109

in-person meeting can be tokenistic if the agenda is fixed, relevant decision-makers are absent, or participants never learn how their input was used. The quality of participation is therefore better assessed by examining links to institutions than by considering the medium alone.

5. Implications for measurement and future research

The report's breadth creates an opportunity for future research to examine how digital experience, institutional contact, political efficacy and participation interact over time. Four measurement priorities follow from this participation-ecosystem perspective.

First, surveys should distinguish participation outputs from participation outcomes. Outputs include attending a meeting, signing a petition, posting content, voting, volunteering or completing a consultation. Outcomes include perceived influence, receipt of feedback, changes to an agenda or decision, learning, trust and willingness to participate again. Counting outputs without measuring outcomes may overestimate the vitality of a participation system, while focusing only on formal outcomes may miss learning and network effects.

Second, research should measure the full participation chain. Questions can separately capture access, voice, audience, influence and response. This would make it possible to identify where civic loneliness emerges. For example, low efficacy following a consultation may reflect exclusion at entry, weak facilitation, lack of access to decision-makers, absence of feedback, or repeated experience of non-response. Each mechanism has different implications, and they cannot be inferred reliably from a single question on whether young people "feel heard."

Third, longitudinal and panel designs are particularly important. The digital-participation literature warns against assuming causal direction from cross-sectional correlations (Oser & Boulianne, 2020). Young people who already possess civic skills and networks may be more likely to use digital tools politically; at the same time, particular forms of online activity may broaden later participation. Repeated measurement would help identify whether experiences of institutional responsiveness strengthen efficacy and whether repeated non-response predicts withdrawal, more confrontational forms of participation, or a shift towards issue-specific networks.

Fourth, distributional differences should remain visible. A participation ecosystem can expand overall opportunities while reproducing inequalities in who has time, confidence, connectivity, organisational support or access to decision-makers. The OECD Youth Policy Toolkit stresses the importance of removing barriers and widening youth participation rather than assuming that a formally open mechanism is equally usable by all young people (OECD, 2024a). Digital channels can reduce some barriers but create others, including skills gaps, accessibility problems, platform dependence and exposure to hostile communication. Disaggregated analysis is therefore essential to distinguish broad reach from equitable influence.

These priorities would also sharpen evaluation of youth-policy initiatives. Rather than asking only how many young people were consulted, evaluators could examine who participated, through which channels, who received their input, what institutional action followed, what feedback participants received, and whether their sense of efficacy changed. Such an approach does not predetermine which policy choices should result from participation. It assesses the integrity and transparency of the participatory process itself.

6. Conclusion

Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026 offers a strong basis for understanding contemporary youth participation because it places civic engagement alongside the digital, educational, social and economic

Bartolini M. (2026). From Civic Loneliness to Participation Ecosystems: Rethinking Youth Agency in the Digital Public Sphere after Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe*. 30-10-2026. https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.13109

conditions that shape it. Its diagnosis of weakened agency and civic loneliness should not be read as a story of youth apathy. It is better understood as a warning about a possible disconnection between expression and consequential participation.

Digital environments intensify this paradox. They expand the capacity to speak, organise and access political information, but they do not by themselves ensure that a responsible person or institution listens or create a visible route to influence. Existing research indicates that online and offline participation are often intertwined, while comparative evidence on institutions shows that perceived voice is closely related to trust. The analytical task is therefore to follow the entire path from access to institutional response.

A participation-ecosystem lens can make that path measurable. By separating access, voice, audience, influence and response—and by tracing the links between digital and face-to-face spaces—future waves of youth research could identify more precisely where participation succeeds, where it becomes merely performative, and where young people experience the institutional distance captured by the phrase "civic loneliness." The resulting picture would be more informative than a binary measure of participation or non-participation: it would show whether young people are not only invited to speak, but connected to decision-making processes in which speaking can matter.

References

Boulianne, S., & Theocharis, Y. (2020). Young people, digital media, and engagement: A meta-analysis of research. *Social Science Computer Review*, *38*(2), 111–127. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439318814190

Council of Europe. (2026). *Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*.

European Commission. (2025, February 19). *Results of the 2024 EU Youth Survey*. EU Child Participation Platform. https://eu-for-children.europa.eu/activities-news/latest/results-of-2024-eu-youth-survey_en

Lundy, L. (2007). *'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. British Educational Research Journal, *33*(6), 927–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

OECD. (2024a). *OECD Youth Policy Toolkit*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/74b6f8f3-en

OECD. (2024b). *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en

Oser, J., & Boulianne, S. (2020). *Reinforcement effects between digital media use and political participation: A meta-analysis of repeated-wave panel data*. Public Opinion Quarterly, *84*(S1), 355–365. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaa017

Polskie Towarzystwo Polityki Społecznej (2026). *Diagnoza Młodzieży 2026: Raport i rekomendacje,* Rabiej, P. (Ed.).