Participa

Comparative joint research study

Needs Mapping for Municipality Officers Working with Youth Councils

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Introduction

Youth participation in local decision-making has long been recognised as an essential component of democratic governance, civic education, and inclusive policy development. Across Europe, youth councils and similar advisory bodies are intended to provide young people with a structured channel through which they can express their needs, contribute to public debate, and influence policies that directly affect their lives. However, despite the existence of legal and institutional frameworks that formally support youth participation, the practical implementation of these mechanisms often remains uneven, fragmented, and highly dependent on local capacities, political will, and available resources.

The PARTICIPA project was developed in response to this **persistent gap between the formal recognition of youth participation and its everyday practice in local governance**. The project application identified a common challenge across the partner countries: youth councils either do not exist in many local communities, or, where they do exist, they often struggle to function as meaningful and influential bodies. Their work is frequently limited by insufficient institutional support, unclear understanding of roles and responsibilities, weak communication with local authorities, limited financial and technical resources, and low motivation among young people to engage in formal participation structures. At the same time, municipal officers and local government representatives responsible for youth (affairs) often lack systematic training in youth work, participatory methods, and youth-friendly governance, which further reduces the potential of youth councils to become active platforms for dialogue and co-creation.

In this context, the project starts from the understanding that **strengthening youth participation requires working simultaneously with both sides of the local participation ecosystem**: young people active in youth councils and the municipal officers who support, coordinate, or interact with them. Youth council members need practical knowledge about their mandate, local governance, advocacy, communication, project development, and ways to mobilise other young people. Municipal officers, on the other hand, need support in understanding youth participation beyond formal procedures, including how to build trust with young people, facilitate inclusive dialogue, use participatory tools, and create enabling conditions for youth councils to operate effectively. The project therefore approaches **youth participation not only as a question of individual motivation, but as a broader capacity-building and governance challenge**.

The comparative study builds on this rationale by **examining the needs, challenges, and existing practices related to youth participation in Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, and Romania**. These countries differ in their legal frameworks, institutional traditions, and levels of development of youth participation structures, but they also share several important concerns. In all contexts, there is a need for more practical, accessible, and context-sensitive learning opportunities for both municipal officers and youth council members. The project application foresees the development of two complementary Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC): one for municipality officers and one for youth council members, both adapted to national contexts and informed by research, focus groups, and examples of good practice.

A key assumption behind this study is that **digital learning can contribute to more resilient and inclusive youth participation systems** when it is combined with non-formal education, mentoring, and advocacy. Digital tools alone cannot solve structural problems such as weak institutional support or limited political commitment, but they can make knowledge more accessible, support

the onboarding of new youth council members, provide practical resources for municipal officers, and create a shared reference point for local actors. In this sense, **the PARTICIPA project connects digital transformation with democratic participation, aiming to make youth engagement more understandable, practical, and sustainable at the local level**.

The purpose of this comparative study is therefore twofold. First, it provides a **cross-country analysis** of the main needs and challenges identified among municipal officers in the partner countries, with particular attention to their role in supporting meaningful youth participation. Second, it offers a **foundation for the design of the first PARTICIPA MOOC** by identifying common learning priorities, country-specific needs, and examples of practice that can inform educational content. By comparing national contexts, the study seeks to move beyond isolated experiences and contribute to a shared European understanding of what municipal officers need in order to become more effective supporters, facilitators, and advocates of youth participation in local governance.

Ultimately, this study is grounded in the belief that **youth participation cannot be reduced to the existence of formal bodies or legal provisions**. Meaningful participation requires relationships, skills, institutional openness, clear roles, accessible information, and continuous support. By identifying the gaps and opportunities present in different national contexts, this comparative report aims to support the development of practical educational tools and policy recommendations that can strengthen youth councils, improve cooperation between young people and municipalities, and contribute to more democratic, inclusive, and youth-responsive local communities.

Methodology

This research was designed to identify the institutional, organisational, and competence-related needs of municipality officers working with youth councils. Its purpose was to provide an evidence-based foundation for adapting the Democracy Reloading Toolkit to the national contexts of Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, and Romania, and for developing a practice-oriented MOOC that supports meaningful youth participation in local decision-making.

The research was guided by one main objective: **to understand how municipality officers can be better supported in their role of enabling, coordinating, and strengthening youth participation through local and regional youth councils**. Based on this objective, the research focused on three specific research questions:

1. How is youth participation through local and/or regional youth councils structured and implemented in practice within the national and institutional context of each partner country?
2. What roles do municipality officers actually have when working with youth councils, and what challenges and barriers affect their ability to support meaningful youth participation?
3. Which skills, knowledge, attitudes, and tools are necessary for meaningful youth participation through local youth councils?

The research was carried out in two main phases. The first phase consisted of **desk research** conducted by each partner organisation at the national level. This phase focused on collecting and systematising available factual, legal, institutional, and quantitative information relevant to youth councils and youth participation. Partners reviewed the institutional framework for youth

participation, national and local legislation regulating youth councils or equivalent youth participation bodies, formal responsibilities of municipalities and youth councils, available data on the existence and functioning of youth councils, and other relevant documents, reports, strategies, and policy materials. The purpose of the desk research was to map the formal framework within which youth councils operate and to provide a common starting point for understanding differences and similarities between the four national contexts.

The second phase introduced a qualitative research component through **focus groups** with municipality officers and representatives of local authorities who work with youth councils in their everyday professional roles. The focus groups were designed to capture practical experiences, challenges, needs, and examples that could not be fully understood through desk research alone. They explored how formal frameworks are implemented in practice, how municipality officers understand their own role, what types of support they provide to youth councils, which barriers they encounter, and what kind of training or tools they consider useful for improving youth participation at the local level.

To ensure consistency and comparability across the four national reports, the consortium agreed on a common reporting template and a shared analytical framework. All partners followed the same structure when presenting their national findings, focusing on six key categories. The first category, **National Context and Structure of Youth Participation**, aimed to understand the institutional and legal framework in each country, including how youth participation is regulated, whether there is a legal obligation to establish youth councils, and whether certain groups of young people remain underrepresented in these structures.

The second category, **Role and Cooperation of Municipality Officers Working with Youth Councils**, focused on comparing formal responsibilities with actual everyday practice. It examined the tasks municipality officers most commonly perform, whether working with youth councils is their primary or additional responsibility, what type of training they have received, how communication with youth councils is organised, whether digital tools are used, and whether youth councils participate meaningfully in decision-making or mainly have a consultative role.

The third category, **Identified Challenges and Barriers**, explored the practical obstacles that affect the establishment and functioning of youth councils, including misunderstandings of their role, weak cooperation mechanisms, limited resources, and the influence of the wider political context.

The fourth category, **Skills and Knowledge Gaps of Municipality Officers**, was directly linked to MOOC development and examined which attitudes, knowledge, skills, mentoring capacities, facilitation methods, and digital tools municipality officers need in order to support youth participation as a continuous process rather than a formal requirement.

The fifth category, **Digital Dimension of Youth Participation**, focused on the use of digital tools in cooperation with youth councils, missing digital competences among municipality officers, and possible institutional or administrative barriers to digitalisation. Finally, the sixth category, **Recommendations for MOOC Design**, translated the research findings into forward-looking conclusions by identifying which topics should become mandatory MOOC modules, which content should be primarily practical rather than theoretical, and which examples of good practice should be included. This shared structure enabled the consortium to compare national findings systematically while still preserving the specificities of each country's context.

In total, focus groups were implemented in all four partner countries. In Croatia, Italy and Cyprus two focus groups were conducted, while in Romania one. In total, 35 participants in all focus groups took part in research. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and followed a **shared research protocol to ensure comparability of findings across countries**, while still allowing space for nationally specific issues to emerge. The discussions were facilitated by partner organisations and focused on the practical realities of working with youth councils, including institutional support, cooperation between young people and local authorities, communication, motivation, inclusion, administrative procedures, and the competencies needed by municipality officers.

The combination of desk research and focus groups enabled the study to **connect the formal and practical dimensions of youth participation**. Desk research provided an overview of the legal, institutional, and policy context, while focus groups offered insight into lived professional experiences and everyday implementation challenges. This mixed approach was particularly important because youth councils may be formally recognised in legislation or policy documents, but their actual effectiveness often depends on local interpretation, available resources, relationships between actors, and the capacities of the officers responsible for supporting them.

The findings from both phases were analysed at national level and then compared across the four partner countries. This comparative approach made it possible to identify common patterns, shared barriers, and country-specific needs. The results will directly inform the development of the MOOC for municipality officers by helping define its learning objectives, thematic modules, practical exercises, and examples of good practice. In this way, the methodology ensured that the educational content is not only aligned with the Democracy Reloading framework, but also grounded in the actual needs and working realities of municipality officers in Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, and Romania.

Analysis

National Context and Structure of Youth Participation

Across the four partner countries, youth participation through youth councils or similar consultative bodies is formally recognised to varying degrees, but its implementation remains uneven and highly dependent on institutional commitment, local political will, and available administrative capacity. Croatia has the most clearly defined legal framework among the analysed countries, with youth councils regulated by the Youth Councils Act, most recently revised in 2023. The Act defines youth councils as advisory bodies of local and regional self-government units and prescribes several procedural elements, including rules of procedure, annual work programmes, financial plans, reporting obligations, and cooperation with representative and executive local bodies. However, the existence of a relatively structured legal framework does not necessarily ensure meaningful participation in practice. Youth councils in Croatia often remain marginal within local decision-making processes, and their influence is frequently limited to narrower areas such as scholarships or youth-related activities, while broader policy engagement remains rare.

In Italy, youth participation is supported through national principles of democratic participation and through regional and municipal policies, but there is no nationwide legal obligation requiring municipalities or regions to establish youth councils. Local youth councils, often known as *Consigli dei Giovani* or *Forum Giovanili*, are usually established voluntarily by local administrations and

function as advisory spaces where young people can express their views on issues such as education, culture, employment, sustainability, and local governance. In some regions, particularly in Southern Italy, regional legislation and funding schemes have encouraged the creation of youth forums, but implementation varies significantly between municipalities. As a result, participation opportunities are uneven and often depend on the resources, continuity, and motivation of individual local authorities or civil society organisations.

Cyprus presents a more centralised and fragmented model. Youth policy is primarily shaped at the level of central government, with the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth holding overall responsibility and the Youth Board of Cyprus acting as the main public body for youth-related issues. The Youth Board Law of 1994 establishes the Youth Board as a public law entity responsible for advising the government, designing and implementing youth programmes, supporting youth initiatives, and promoting the welfare and participation of young people. However, there is no comprehensive National Youth Law and no specific legislation regulating youth councils at national, municipal, or community level. Municipal and Community Youth Councils were introduced through initiatives of the Youth Board of Cyprus in cooperation with local authorities, and a framework of operating regulations exists, but it has not been updated since 2001. Their establishment is not legally mandated and therefore depends largely on local initiative, political will, and administrative priorities.

In Romania, youth participation is regulated less through specific youth council legislation and more through broader mechanisms of public consultation and decision-making transparency. The Youth Strategy promotes civic, public, and political participation, but key concepts related to youth participation are not formally defined. Law No. 52/2003 on Decision-Making Transparency serves as the main instrument for public consultation, requiring public authorities to publish draft normative acts and enable citizens and organisations to submit comments or request public debates. The Youth Law also requires public authorities to consult youth organisations on initiatives relevant to young people and refers to the establishment of consultative councils on youth issues. However, the establishment of such councils is not strictly mandatory and is implemented unevenly through local or county-level decisions. At national level, the Consultative Council on Youth Issues operates as a dialogue mechanism between the competent ministry and youth organisations, while similar consultative structures at local and county level exist only in some municipalities and counties, depending on the commitment of local authorities.

Despite differences in legal and institutional design, **all four countries show a gap between formal participation mechanisms and their practical effectiveness**. In Croatia, formal compliance often exists, but youth councils may become inactive during their mandate, with motivation declining over time. In Cyprus, the lack of binding legal provisions leads to inconsistencies in the structure, mandate, and functioning of youth councils across local authorities. In Italy, the voluntary nature of youth councils creates strong territorial differences, particularly between municipalities with active youth policies and those with limited infrastructure or continuity. In Romania, the legal framework encourages consultation, but the absence of consistently implemented local structures means that participation often remains dependent on broader public consultation procedures rather than youth-specific mechanisms.

A common issue across the countries is t**he limited representativeness and inclusiveness of youth participation structures**. In Italy, migrant youth, young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, rural youth, and young women may face barriers related to access,

information, mobility, and social inclusion. In Cyprus, participation is often driven by already active and organised young people, while rural youth, marginalised groups, and young people outside formal structures are less represented. In Croatia, the legal framework defines eligibility broadly but does not include specific mechanisms, quotas, or targeted measures for underrepresented groups such as migrants, young women, or rural youth. Focus group findings also point to **the overrepresentation of politically affiliated young people in some youth councils**. In Romania, although youth organisations are formally included in consultative mechanisms, the inclusiveness of these structures depends on who is organised, represented, and able to participate in formal consultation processes.

Overall, the comparative findings suggest that **youth participation through youth councils is not only a question of whether legal or institutional structures exist, but also how they are supported, understood, and used in practice**. Croatia demonstrates that a developed legal framework does not automatically lead to meaningful influence. Italy and Cyprus show how reliance on local initiative can result in fragmented and uneven participation opportunities. Romania illustrates the limits of general public consultation mechanisms when they are not accompanied by stable and youth-specific participatory structures. Across all contexts, meaningful youth participation requires clearer mandates, stronger institutional support, better outreach to diverse groups of young people, and more systematic mechanisms that move youth councils beyond symbolic consultation toward genuine involvement in local decision-making.

Category	Croatia	Italy	Cyprus	Romania
Main legal institutional framework	Youth participation is primarily regulated through the Youth Councils Act, most recently revised in 2023. Youth councils are defined as advisory bodies of local and regional self-government units.	Youth participation is supported by constitutional principles, national policies, and regional or municipal regulations, but there is no unified national framework for youth councils.	Youth policy is centralised. The main legal instrument is the Youth Board Law of 1994, which establishes the Youth Board of Cyprus as the main public body for youth issues.	Youth participation is mainly regulated through broader public consultation mechanisms, especially Law No. 52/2003 on Decision-Making Transparency and the Youth Law.
Legal obligation to establish youth councils	There is a clear legal basis and strong expectation for local and regional self-government units to establish youth councils.	There is no nationwide legal obligation. Youth councils or youth forums are usually established voluntarily by local or regional authorities.	There is no legal obligation for municipalities or communities to establish youth councils. Their creation depends on local initiative and political will.	Consultative councils on youth issues are legally encouraged, but not strictly mandatory. Their establishment depends on local

				or county-level decisions.
Type and role of youth councils / structures	Youth councils are advisory bodies intended to enable young people to participate in decision-making on youth-related issues.	Youth councils or youth forums usually function as advisory and consultative bodies on topics such as education, culture, employment, sustainability, and local governance.	Municipal and Community Youth Councils function as advisory or participatory structures, but their mandate and functioning vary between local authorities.	Consultative councils serve mainly to inform authorities about young people's views and facilitate communication on youth-related issues.
Level of institutionalisation	Relatively high on paper, with defined procedures, work programmes, financial plans, and reporting obligations.	Uneven and decentralised; institutionalisation depends heavily on regional legislation, municipal initiative, and available resources.	Fragmented and weakly institutionalised, due to the absence of specific legislation regulating youth councils.	Partial and inconsistent; consultation mechanisms exist, but youth-specific structures are not systematically established across the country.
Implementation in practice	Formal requirements are often met, but meaningful influence is limited and depends on local political will, administrative support, and youth motivation.	Implementation varies significantly between municipalities. Some regions have stronger practices, while others lack continuity and infrastructure.	Practice differs widely between municipalities and communities. Youth councils depend on local priorities, resources, and administrative capacity.	Implementation is uneven. Some county or local councils are active, while others do not have functional consultative youth structures.
Main practical challenges	Declining motivation during mandates, inactivity of some councils, limited influence on decision-making, weak visibility, and marginalisation within local governance.	Territorial disparities, lack of continuity in local youth policies, high youth unemployment, limited infrastructure, and dependence on local commitment.	Lack of binding legal framework, outdated operating regulations, inconsistent mandates, limited resources, and weak integration into decision-making.	Lack of clear definitions of youth participation, non-functional previous attempts to establish national youth council structures, and uneven implementation at local level.
Inclusiveness and representation	The legal framework does not include	Migrant youth, rural youth, young women, and young	Participation is often dominated by already active	Representation depends largely on organised youth

	specific mechanisms for underrepresented groups. Politically affiliated youth may be overrepresented in some councils.	people from disadvantaged backgrounds may face barriers to participation.	young people, while rural youth, marginalised groups, and non-organised youth are less represented.	structures and NGOs that are able to participate in formal consultation processes.
Overall assessment	Croatia has a structured legal framework, but a significant gap remains between formal participation opportunities and actual influence.	Italy shows strong local potential, but youth participation remains fragmented and highly dependent on local and regional initiative.	Cyprus has an institutional youth policy structure, but youth councils lack a binding and updated legal framework.	Romania has consultation mechanisms, but youth-specific participation structures remain inconsistently implemented.

Role and Cooperation of Municipality Officers Working with Youth Councils

Across the four partner countries, **municipality officers working with youth councils most commonly perform a combination of administrative, coordination, communication, and facilitation tasks**. Their role usually includes organising meetings, preparing documentation, managing membership or participation procedures, maintaining communication between youth councils and municipal structures, and supporting the organisation of youth-led activities, projects, or events. In all countries, officers often act as **intermediaries between young people and local authorities**, helping translate youth proposals into formats that can be understood and processed within administrative systems.

A common finding across Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, and Romania is that **working with youth councils is rarely a dedicated full-time position**. Instead, it is usually an additional responsibility combined with other areas such as culture, education, social affairs, sports, European projects, communication, or community development. This significantly affects the time, continuity, and strategic attention that officers can dedicate to youth participation. While some municipalities have more structured arrangements or partially dedicated youth-related roles, the general pattern shows that youth council support depends heavily on the personal motivation, availability, and experience of individual officers rather than on clearly defined institutional positions.

The Croatian findings illustrate this ambiguity particularly clearly. Although most local and regional authorities formally designate an officer responsible for youth councils, their role is mainly administrative on paper, while in practice it often extends into mentoring, facilitation, and informal support. Officers help young people navigate administrative procedures, understand institutional rules, organise activities, and maintain continuity between meetings or mandates. At the same time, they face a delicate balance between supporting youth council members and avoiding taking over responsibilities that should remain with young people themselves. Similar patterns are visible in Cyprus and Romania, where officers often provide practical guidance, mediate between youth

councils and municipal departments, and support young people in transforming ideas into feasible proposals or actions.

Training remains one of the clearest gaps across all four contexts. **Municipality officers generally do not receive systematic preparation for working with youth councils**, youth participation, facilitation, mentoring, or youth work. In Italy, some officers gain relevant experience through EU-funded projects, regional programmes, or non-formal education activities, but access to such opportunities is uneven, especially in smaller or rural municipalities. In Cyprus and Croatia, most officers rely primarily on practical experience and personal motivation, while in Romania participants explicitly highlighted the lack of dedicated training programmes focused on the specific challenges of working with youth councils. This confirms the need for structured learning opportunities that would strengthen officers' ability to support young people without replacing their initiative or autonomy.

Communication between municipality officers and youth councils combines formal and informal channels, but the balance differs by country and local context. Formal communication remains necessary because of municipal procedures, official correspondence, meeting agendas, minutes, and reporting obligations. However, everyday cooperation increasingly relies on informal and faster communication tools, especially messaging applications such as WhatsApp or Viber, phone calls, emails, and social media. Romania and Cyprus report frequent and ongoing communication, often combining regular or monthly meetings with continuous digital contact. In Italy, communication varies significantly and is often shaped by direct personal relationships, with meetings organised monthly or around specific initiatives. In Croatia, communication is described as more irregular and reactive, usually becoming more active before meetings or specific activities rather than being continuous and strategically planned.

Digital tools are widely used in all four countries, mostly for practical coordination rather than for deeper participatory processes. WhatsApp, Viber, email, Zoom, Google Meet, Google Drive, Google Forms, Doodle, Mentimeter, Facebook, and Instagram are used to coordinate meetings, share documents, collect feedback, promote activities, and maintain contact with young people. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of digital tools, particularly in Italy, while in Cyprus, Romania, and Croatia digital communication has become an important way to make cooperation faster and more youth-friendly. However, digital tools do not automatically solve cooperation challenges. In Croatia, for example, officers noted a mismatch between slow institutional communication procedures and young people's expectations for quick and flexible interaction. In Cyprus and Romania, digital tools improve accessibility but do not replace the need for clearer structures, stronger initiative, and more consistent engagement.

In terms of governance, **youth councils in all four countries primarily have a consultative rather than decision-making role**. They can propose ideas, provide feedback, express opinions, participate in consultations, and contribute to youth-related initiatives, but final decisions generally remain with elected municipal authorities or formal administrative bodies. Their influence depends strongly on the openness of local authorities, the quality of cooperation with officers, and the degree to which municipal structures are willing to integrate youth input into policies or actions. In Romania and Cyprus, youth councils may influence local initiatives when collaboration is strong, but they still lack formal decision-making power. In Croatia, their impact is often visible only in specific areas such as scholarships, while broader policy involvement remains limited. In Italy,

youth councils can contribute to discussions on culture, education, employment, sustainability, or local events, but their role often remains advisory.

Several **barriers to effective cooperation are shared across all countries**. The most common are limited staff capacity, lack of dedicated time and resources, insufficient training, weak institutional recognition, unclear procedures, and dependence on individual motivation. Political context also plays an important role. In Italy, changes in local political leadership can interrupt continuity, while in Romania and Croatia support for youth councils can depend on the priorities of the current administration. Cyprus shows similar challenges, especially where youth participation is not strongly prioritised within local governance structures. These barriers create fragile cooperation models that are vulnerable to staff turnover, changes in political leadership, and fluctuations in youth motivation.

Another important barrier relates to **young people's engagement and sense of ownership**. In Cyprus and Romania, focus group findings suggest that young people do not always take initiative or responsibility for planning and implementing activities, often waiting for the municipality to propose topics or guide the process. In Croatia, officers similarly described the challenge of providing support without doing the work instead of youth council members. In Italy, long-term engagement is affected by education and employment migration, limited trust in institutions, mobility barriers, and low continuity in disadvantaged or rural areas. Across countries, the same tension appears: **youth councils need institutional support to function, but if support becomes too directive, it can weaken youth autonomy and ownership**.

Overall, municipality officers play a crucial but insufficiently recognised role in the functioning of youth councils. Although their formal responsibilities are often administrative, their actual work is much broader and includes mediation, mentoring, facilitation, motivation, communication, and informal problem-solving. **This gap between formal job descriptions and practical expectations creates uncertainty for officers and affects the quality of cooperation with young people**. The findings therefore point to a clear need for better-defined roles, more dedicated staff capacity, systematic training, practical tools for communication and facilitation, and institutional mechanisms that support youth councils as meaningful participatory bodies rather than symbolic consultative structures.

Category	Croatia	Italy	Cyprus	Romania
Position of municipality officers	Officers responsible for youth councils are usually formally designated, but their positions are rarely dedicated exclusively to youth participation.	Working with youth councils is usually an additional responsibility, often combined with culture, education, social policy, or community development.	The role is not formally specialised and is never a primary responsibility; it is usually assigned to general administrative staff.	Working with youth councils is most often a secondary task, combined with communication, education, community services, or other duties.

Main tasks in practice	Organising meetings, preparing documentation, facilitating communication, supporting administrative procedures, mentoring, and helping maintain continuity.	Coordinating meetings, facilitating communication, supporting events and projects, navigating procedures, and mediating between youth and authorities.	Organising meetings, preparing documentation, facilitating communication, advising on procedures, and assessing feasibility of youth proposals.	Acting as secretariat, managing membership, coordinating meetings, preparing minutes, mediating with departments, and translating youth ideas into proposals.
Formal role vs. actual role	Formal role is mostly administrative, but in practice officers also act as mentors, facilitators, and informal coordinators.	Officers formally support coordination, but in practice often become key mediators between young people and decision-makers.	The role remains largely administrative, although officers often provide practical guidance and informal support.	Officers combine administrative, communication, and facilitation roles, often becoming general connectors between young people and institutions.
Training and capacity-building	Formal training in youth work, facilitation, or mentoring is rare; officers mostly rely on experience and personal motivation.	Training is uneven. Some officers gain experience through EU projects, regional programmes, or non-formal education, but this is not systematic.	Most officers have no specific training in youth participation, facilitation, or youth work.	Dedicated training for working with youth councils is largely missing, although some officers have access to general youth work or NGO-led training.
Communication with youth councils	Often irregular and reactive, usually linked to meetings or specific activities. Formal channels dominate, but informal tools are used in daily cooperation.	Varies by municipality; often informal, based on personal relationships, messaging apps, phone calls, social media, and occasional meetings.	Frequent and ongoing, especially with youth council presidents; combines formal correspondence with informal digital communication.	Frequent and ongoing, combining monthly meetings and formal documentation with continuous communication through digital tools.
Use of digital tools	WhatsApp, Viber, Zoom, Google Forms, Doodle, Mentimeter, and similar tools are used, but institutional	Digital tools such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meet, Google Drive, email, Instagram, and Facebook are increasingly used.	Viber, phone calls, online platforms, Facebook, and Instagram are used for coordination, promotion, and youth-friendly communication.	WhatsApp, email, Zoom, Google Meet, Facebook, and Instagram are widely used for coordination, formal communication, and promotion.

	procedures remain slow and formal.			
Role of youth councils in decision-making	Mostly consultative, with limited influence on policy outcomes. Impact is more visible in specific areas such as scholarships.	Mainly consultative. Youth councils can propose ideas and initiatives, but final decisions remain with elected authorities.	Primarily consultative. Influence depends on the willingness of municipal authorities to consider and integrate proposals.	Mainly advisory. Youth councils can provide feedback and recommendations, but do not have formal decision-making power.
Main barriers to cooperation	Lack of dedicated staff capacity, unclear role expectations, limited training, slow administrative procedures, and declining youth motivation.	Limited financial and human resources, lack of continuity, low institutional recognition, insufficient training, migration, low trust, and symbolic participation.	Lack of dedicated staff and resources, limited training, low prioritisation of youth participation, weak initiative among young people, and unclear processes.	Limited staff time, lack of clear structures and resources, low youth initiative, weak awareness, outmigration, turnover, and political dependence.
Specific cooperation challenge	Officers must balance supporting young people with not taking over their responsibilities.	Cooperation often depends on the commitment of individual municipalities and officers.	Continuity can improve when the same officer supports youth councils over several mandates, but this is not guaranteed.	Cooperation depends heavily on individual initiative when youth-related responsibilities are not formalised or prioritised.
Overall assessment	Officers play a broad and important role, but it is insufficiently defined and poorly supported institutionally.	Officers are key mediators, but their work is limited by lack of dedicated time, training, and continuity.	Officers provide essential administrative and practical support, but the role lacks specialisation and structured capacity-building.	Officers act as facilitators and institutional connectors, but their role is weakened by limited formalisation and inconsistent support.

Identified Challenges and Barriers

Across the four partner countries, the establishment and effective functioning of youth councils are shaped by **a combination of structural, institutional, political, and participation-related barriers**. Although the specific legal and administrative contexts differ, the findings consistently show that youth councils often depend more on local commitment, individual motivation, and available resources than on stable and systematic support mechanisms. This makes their functioning fragile

and uneven, particularly in smaller municipalities, rural areas, or communities with limited administrative capacity.

One of the most common challenges is **the lack of stable institutional and financial support**. In Italy, many youth councils depend on temporary projects, voluntary engagement, or the motivation of individual officers, which makes their activities inconsistent over time. Similar patterns are visible in Cyprus, where the absence of a dedicated legal framework and limited formal recognition result in unclear mandates and weak institutional positioning. In Romania, youth councils often lack dedicated staff, clear responsibilities, infrastructure, and resources, while their work frequently depends on individual initiative rather than formalised administrative structures. In Croatia, despite a clearer legal framework, youth councils remain operationally fragile because their effectiveness is strongly shaped by local conditions, available support, and the engagement of specific actors.

A second shared barrier is **the limited awareness and frequent misunderstanding of the role of youth councils**. In all four countries, youth councils are sometimes perceived as symbolic, promotional, or event-oriented bodies rather than as meaningful participatory structures. In Italy and Croatia, their work is often reduced to organising cultural, social, recreational, or humanitarian activities, while their potential contribution to policymaking, social inclusion, and community development remains underestimated. In Cyprus, the lack of clear mandates creates different expectations among stakeholders and uncertainty about what youth councils are supposed to achieve. In Romania, both young people and, in some cases, local administrations have only a partial understanding of youth councils' role in local governance, which can reduce initiative, weaken support, and limit their influence.

The establishment of youth councils is also affected by **difficulties in recruiting and retaining young people**. In Croatia, public calls for youth council members often need to be repeated because of a lack of applications, pointing to low awareness and limited interest among young people. Romania reports similar challenges, especially in smaller communities, where outreach through schools, sports clubs, or NGOs is often necessary to identify potential participants. In Cyprus, limited awareness of the existence and potential impact of youth councils, particularly in rural or less centralised areas, contributes to low engagement. In Italy, sustained participation is affected by factors such as limited trust in institutions, socio-economic barriers, and migration for education or employment.

Even when youth councils are established, **maintaining engagement over time remains a major challenge**. In Croatia, motivation is often high at the beginning of a mandate but declines over time due to education, employment, relocation, and competing personal obligations. This leads to inconsistent participation, difficulties in maintaining quorum, and a concentration of responsibilities among a small number of active members. Similar issues appear in Romania, where participation fluctuates depending on young people's availability, interest, and the perceived relevance of topics, while youth outmigration further weakens continuity. In Cyprus, low initiative and limited responsibility among young people can make cooperation more difficult, while in Italy long-term engagement is often weakened by a lack of continuity in local youth policies and limited opportunities in disadvantaged or rural areas.

Political context plays a significant role in all four countries. In Italy, the effectiveness of youth councils often depends on the willingness of local political leaders to support participatory processes, maintain communication, and provide resources. Changes in local administrations or political priorities can interrupt ongoing initiatives and weaken institutional support. In Cyprus, the

establishment and sustainability of youth councils depend heavily on political will at the municipal or community level, since they are not systematically integrated into governance mechanisms. In Romania, political dynamics can either support or constrain youth participation, particularly in smaller or more polarised communities where youth initiatives may be interpreted as criticism or opposition. In Croatia, youth-related issues are often marginalised within local governance structures, while political alignment can influence access to support, internal dynamics, and the perceived legitimacy of proposals.

Another important barrier is **the weak or inconsistent integration of youth councils into actual decision-making processes**. Across all contexts, youth councils mainly operate in a consultative role, but their input is not always meaningfully considered. In Croatia, youth council reports may be placed at the end of municipal council agendas, with little discussion or follow-up, signalling that youth participation is treated as a secondary priority. In Italy, youth councils risk becoming symbolic if their proposals are not integrated into local decision-making. In Cyprus, reliance on informal relationships and ad hoc collaboration limits their ability to influence policy consistently. In Romania, the lack of legal personality or formal decision-making power makes continuity and accountability difficult and reinforces the need for ongoing administrative support.

Administrative complexity and practical limitations further affect youth councils' work. In Croatia, municipal procedures are often difficult for young people to navigate independently, creating strong dependence on municipality officers and sometimes leading officers to complete tasks on behalf of youth council members. This can sustain short-term functioning but may limit youth autonomy. A similar need for administrative mediation is visible in Romania, where officers often help translate youth ideas into formal proposals and connect young people with relevant departments. Practical obstacles such as lack of meeting spaces, insufficient equipment, poor infrastructure, and difficulties in scheduling meetings also affect the work of youth councils, especially in smaller communities.

Finally, several barriers relate to the **internal functioning and cohesion of youth councils**. Croatia highlights weak internal cohesion, limited informal bonding, and political divisions among members as factors that can undermine trust and cooperation. Romania points to high turnover, particularly among student-based organisations, which weakens institutional memory and requires constant re-engagement of new members. Cyprus and Italy also show that youth councils often depend on a smaller group of active young people, while broader participation remains limited. These patterns reduce the representativeness, sustainability, and long-term effectiveness of youth councils.

Overall, the findings show that **youth councils face a persistent gap between their intended role as participatory and consultative structures and their actual influence in local governance**. The main barriers include weak institutionalisation, limited resources, unclear role perceptions, low visibility, political dependence, administrative complexity, unstable youth engagement, and insufficient integration into decision-making processes. At the same time, the findings also indicate that where local authorities demonstrate genuine commitment, provide resources, and treat youth councils as relevant partners, these structures can become important platforms for civic engagement, democratic learning, and meaningful youth participation.

Category	Croatia	Italy	Cyprus	Romania
Main structural challenge	Youth councils are formally regulated, but operationally fragile and highly dependent on local conditions and individual actors.	Youth councils often lack stable financial and institutional support and depend on temporary projects or individual motivation.	Youth councils lack a dedicated legal framework, formal recognition, and clear institutional positioning.	Youth councils face weak institutionalisation, unclear responsibilities, and limited formal support within local administration.
Institutional support	Support exists formally, but is not always systematic or sufficient for meaningful participation.	Support varies significantly between municipalities and is often inconsistent over time.	Institutional support is limited, with insufficient administrative resources, lack of dedicated personnel, and outdated guidelines.	Support often depends on individual initiative rather than formalised administrative structures.
Financial and human resources	Limited staff capacity and resources affect continuity and quality of support.	Limited financial and human resources are a major obstacle, especially in smaller municipalities.	Lack of dedicated staff and sufficient resources limits the consistent functioning of youth councils.	Lack of dedicated staff, infrastructure, meeting spaces, equipment, and resources limits youth council activities.
Understanding of youth councils' role	Their role is often misunderstood and reduced to organising events rather than contributing to policy-making.	Youth councils are sometimes seen as symbolic or promotional bodies rather than meaningful spaces for dialogue and participation.	There is a lack of clarity regarding their mandate, role, and contribution to local decision-making.	Young people and sometimes local authorities have only partial understanding of the councils' participatory and consultative role.
Visibility and awareness	Low visibility among young people leads to repeated public calls and limited interest in participation.	Low awareness among both young people and public institutions weakens engagement and recognition.	Limited awareness, especially in rural and less centralised areas, reduces youth engagement.	Many young people are not aware that they can participate in local decision-making processes.
Youth engagement and retention	Motivation often declines during the mandate due to education, work, relocation, and	Engagement can be weakened by migration, low trust in institutions, and lack of	Low initiative and limited responsibility among young people can affect	Recruiting and retaining young people is difficult, especially in smaller communities and

	competing obligations.	continuity in youth policies.	the functioning of councils.	areas affected by outmigration.
Decision-making influence	Youth councils have limited influence, often restricted to specific issues such as scholarships.	Youth proposals are not always integrated into municipal decision-making, making participation potentially symbolic.	Youth councils mainly operate as advisory bodies with limited influence on decision-making.	Youth councils lack formal decision-making power and legal personality, which limits their influence and accountability.
Political influence	Youth issues are often marginalised, and political alignment can affect support and internal dynamics.	Political will strongly shapes support, funding, continuity, and the perceived independence of youth councils.	The establishment and sustainability of youth councils depend heavily on local political will.	Political dynamics can either enable or constrain youth councils, especially in smaller or polarised communities.
Administrative barriers	Complex municipal procedures create dependence on municipality officers and can reduce youth autonomy.	Administrative capacity is limited in smaller municipalities, reducing structured participation opportunities.	Lack of clear institutional processes creates inconsistencies in cooperation and implementation.	Administrative procedures, unclear structures, and coordination difficulties make youth council work harder to sustain.
Continuity and sustainability	High turnover, weak internal cohesion, and declining motivation reduce continuity.	Changes in political priorities or administrations can interrupt youth council work.	Sustainability depends on local initiative rather than systematic institutional mechanisms.	Continuity is affected by youth outmigration, turnover, postponed meetings, and inconsistent participation.
Overall assessment	The main gap is between a strong formal framework and weak practical implementation.	The main challenge is fragmented and uneven support across municipalities.	The main challenge is weak legal and institutional anchoring of youth councils.	The main challenge is insufficient formalisation and unstable local implementation.

Skills and Knowledge Gaps of Municipality Officers

Across the four partner countries, **municipality officers working with youth councils are expected to perform roles that go well beyond administration**. Although their formal responsibilities are often linked to coordination, documentation, and communication, their everyday work increasingly requires facilitation, mentoring, youth engagement, process management, and the ability to

connect young people with institutional decision-making. However, the findings show that **these broader competencies are not systematically developed**, and officers often rely on personal motivation, previous experience, and informal learning rather than structured training or institutional support.

One of the most important gaps identified across all countries concerns **facilitation and participatory governance skills**. In Italy, officers often lack specific competences for engaging young people, managing group dynamics, and translating informal youth input into actionable policy recommendations. Similar needs were identified in Romania, where participants highlighted the importance of facilitation skills, non-formal and interactive methods, active listening, and the ability to support consultations in a way that makes youth input meaningful. In Croatia, facilitation needs are closely linked to the challenge of maintaining motivation, managing expectations, and supporting young people without taking over their responsibilities. In Cyprus, communication, active listening, openness, flexibility, and adaptability were highlighted as essential for building trust and responding to young people's different needs and communication styles.

Communication skills appear as a central competence gap in all four contexts. Officers need to communicate with young people in ways that are accessible, relatable, and youth-friendly, rather than relying exclusively on formal or bureaucratic language. In Cyprus and Romania, this was explicitly identified as a key requirement for effective cooperation. In Croatia, the mismatch between formal administrative communication and young people's expectations for faster, more flexible interaction was particularly emphasised. In Italy, the need for stronger intercultural communication and inclusive practices was also noted, reflecting the diversity of young people and the need to reach groups that may otherwise remain excluded from participation processes.

Another shared gap concerns **the understanding of youth participation as an ongoing process rather than a formal requirement**. In Croatia, this issue is particularly visible: youth participation is often approached as something linked to the formal establishment and basic functioning of youth councils, rather than as a continuous process requiring support, development, and follow-up. In Italy, this understanding is growing but remains uneven; in some municipalities, participation is seen as a long-term strategy for civic engagement and community development, while in others it remains connected mainly to specific projects, consultation events, or funding requirements. In Cyprus and Romania, youth participation is often understood as meaningful dialogue and consultation where youth input can influence local initiatives, but the consistency and depth of this process depend heavily on local institutional support, awareness, and available capacity.

Digital competencies represent another important area for development. In all four countries, municipality officers use basic digital tools for communication and coordination, such as email, WhatsApp, Viber, Zoom, Google Meet, shared documents, and social media. However, **these tools are rarely used in a structured way** for mentoring, facilitation, co-creation, online consultation, or collaborative decision-making. Italy points to a lack of familiarity with more advanced digital platforms for participatory governance and online youth engagement beyond social media. Cyprus and Romania similarly show that digital tools are mainly used for scheduling, information-sharing, and day-to-day communication, while their potential for strategic engagement remains underdeveloped. In Croatia, digital tools are already used informally, but officers need more systematic knowledge on how to use them to support participation, inclusion, and sustained engagement.

A further gap relates to **mentoring and support frameworks**. In all countries, officers frequently provide informal guidance to youth council members, but dedicated mentoring models, structured facilitation toolkits, and institutionalised youth participation platforms are generally missing. Italy and Romania report that municipalities mostly rely on standard communication tools and individual initiative rather than formalised mentoring approaches. In Croatia, officers often help young people understand procedures, plan activities, and navigate the system, but they lack clear tools for onboarding, mentoring, and transferring administrative knowledge. Cyprus also shows that young people may need encouragement and mentorship from local structures, but such support is not always formally recognised or consistently provided.

Procedural and methodological knowledge is especially important in contexts where young people struggle to understand institutional systems. In Croatia, officers are usually familiar with administrative procedures but lack structured approaches for explaining these procedures to youth council members, onboarding new members, supporting planning, and monitoring youth council work. Romania identifies a similar need for better knowledge of how youth councils function, how to involve young people in consultations, and how to ensure that their input is meaningfully included. These gaps show that municipality officers need not only knowledge of administrative rules, but also methods for translating those rules into accessible and practical guidance for young people.

Strategic and political literacy also emerges as an important competence area, particularly in Croatia and Italy, but with relevance across all contexts. Officers need to understand how to position youth councils within local governance structures, advocate for the relevance of youth participation, engage decision-makers, and support youth councils in moving beyond event-based activities toward policy contributions. This is particularly important where political support is inconsistent or where youth councils risk being perceived as symbolic bodies. Officers therefore need skills not only for working with young people, but also for navigating institutional and political environments in which youth participation takes place.

At the same time, the findings show that **municipality officers already possess important competencies that can serve as a foundation for further development**. In Cyprus, organisational and coordination skills were identified as generally well developed, particularly in relation to managing meetings, supporting administrative functioning, and maintaining cooperation. Similar strengths are visible in Romania and Croatia, where officers often act as connectors between young people and institutions. However, these existing competencies need to be complemented by more specific skills in youth work, facilitation, inclusion, digital participation, and participatory governance.

Overall, **the findings point to a clear shift in the expected role of municipality officers: from administrative coordinators to facilitators of youth participation**. This shift is not yet fully reflected in training systems, job descriptions, institutional expectations, or available tools. For this reason, the future MOOC should be practical, modular, and directly applicable to officers' everyday work. It should include concrete examples, templates, facilitation methods, mentoring tools, digital participation practices, and opportunities for peer learning. The strongest need across all countries is not for abstract theory, but for hands-on support that helps officers strengthen meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable youth participation in practice.

Category	Croatia	Italy	Cyprus	Romania
Main competence gap	Officers are expected to act as facilitators and mentors, but this role is not supported by systematic training or clear institutional tools.	Competencies vary significantly between municipalities, with gaps in facilitation, participatory governance, and youth work methods.	Officers need stronger youth-friendly communication, active listening, flexibility, and adaptability.	Officers need stronger skills in communication, facilitation, active listening, coordination, and digital engagement.
Understanding of youth participation	Youth participation is often understood as a formal requirement rather than an ongoing process of engagement and support.	Understanding is growing, but uneven; in some contexts participation is still linked mainly to projects or formal consultation.	Participation is understood as dialogue and consultation, but its quality depends on local support and awareness.	Participation is generally seen as a meaningful process where councils are active, but implementation varies across contexts.
Facilitation and mentoring skills	Officers need tools for managing motivation, expectations, group dynamics, and the balance between support and youth autonomy.	Officers need skills to engage young people, manage group dynamics, and translate informal input into policy recommendations.	Officers often provide support and encouragement, but mentoring is not consistently structured or formally recognised.	Officers need non-formal and interactive methods that encourage young people to participate actively.
Communication skills	There is a mismatch between formal municipal communication and young people's expectation of faster, more flexible interaction.	Officers need stronger intercultural communication and inclusive practices, especially in diverse local communities.	Communication must be accessible, relatable, and youth-friendly, avoiding overly bureaucratic approaches.	Officers need to communicate with young people in an accessible and relatable way.
Digital competences	Digital tools are used informally, but officers need more systematic knowledge on using them for participation and engagement.	Officers use basic tools, but often lack knowledge of advanced platforms for online participation and collaborative decision-making.	Digital tools are mostly used for basic communication and coordination; strategic use for mentoring or co-creation is limited.	Digital tools are widely used for communication, but not systematically integrated into mentoring,

				facilitation, or consultation.
Existing digital tools	WhatsApp, Viber, Zoom, online surveys, and similar tools are used, mostly informally.	Email, messaging apps, video conferencing, shared documents, and social media are commonly used.	Email, telephone, Viber, and social media are mainly used for scheduling, information-sharing, and daily communication.	WhatsApp, email, Zoom, Google Meet, and social media are used for coordination and information-sharing.
Procedural and methodological knowledge	Officers know administrative systems, but lack structured methods for onboarding youth council members and explaining procedures.	Dedicated mentoring frameworks and structured facilitation toolkits are often missing, especially in smaller municipalities.	Organisational and coordination skills are generally present, but structured youth participation methods are less developed.	Officers need better understanding of how youth councils function and how to ensure youth input is meaningful.
Strategic and political literacy	Officers need skills to position youth councils within local governance and support their move from events to policy contributions.	Officers need to support youth councils as part of long-term civic engagement and community development, not only as project-based structures.	Officers need greater awareness of how to sustain participation where institutional support is weaker.	Officers need to encourage youth participation proactively and support young people as legitimate contributors to decision-making.
Inclusion-related competences	There is limited capacity to actively include diverse groups of young people in youth council processes.	Inclusive practices are needed to respond to the diversity of young people involved or potentially involved.	Officers need adaptability to respond to different needs, expectations, and communication styles of young people.	Officers need a more supportive and open attitude toward youth participation, especially in less active communities.
Main training need	Practical tools, templates, peer exchange, short modular learning, and certification.	Structured training in youth work, facilitation, participatory governance, and digital participation.	Capacity-building in youth-friendly communication, active listening, mentoring, and digital engagement.	Dedicated training focused specifically on working with youth councils and supporting participatory processes.
Overall assessment	The expected role of officers has expanded from	Officers' capacities are uneven and depend on local	Officers have administrative and organisational	Officers are motivated to support youth

	administration to facilitation, but training and tools have not followed this shift.	resources, experience, and access to training.	strengths, but need more youth-specific and participatory competences.	councils, but need clearer methods, tools, and structured training.

Digital Dimension of Youth Participation

Across the four partner countries, digital tools are widely present in cooperation between municipality officers and youth councils, but their use remains mostly basic, informal, and focused on operational coordination. In Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, and Romania, officers commonly rely on instant messaging applications, email, online meeting platforms, shared documents, and social media to organise meetings, exchange information, promote activities, and maintain contact with young people. However, **these tools are rarely integrated into a structured digital participation strategy**. Their use is generally ad hoc and depends on the initiative, competences, and habits of individual officers or municipalities.

A common pattern is **the strong reliance on instant messaging platforms** such as WhatsApp and Viber. These tools are used for quick updates, reminders, informal coordination, and maintaining day-to-day communication with youth council members. In Croatia, this shift toward instant communication is particularly visible, as traditional administrative channels such as official emails and phone calls are often perceived as too slow or ineffective for engaging young people. Similar patterns are present in Italy, Romania, and Cyprus, where messaging apps help make communication faster, more flexible, and more accessible. At the same time, official email remains important for formal correspondence, documents, agendas, and administrative procedures.

Online meeting platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet are also used, especially when in-person participation is difficult. In Croatia, they help maintain the involvement of youth council members who study or live outside their municipality. In Romania and Italy, online meetings support participation when physical meetings are not possible, while in Cyprus their use is present but less frequent. Shared digital spaces, such as Google Drive, are also used in some contexts to exchange documents and collaborate on proposals. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Instagram, are used for outreach, promotion, visibility, and communication with a wider youth audience, although their use varies significantly between municipalities.

Despite this widespread use, **digital tools are mostly applied for communication and logistical coordination rather than for meaningful participation**. In all four countries, there is limited evidence of digital platforms being used systematically for structured consultations, deliberation, co-creation, online voting, participatory budgeting, or collaborative decision-making. Croatia describes this as a clear paradox: both officers and young people are digitally active, but digital tools rarely support deeper participation processes. Italy similarly shows that digital tools are often used informally rather than as part of a broader digital participation strategy. In Cyprus and Romania, digital tools support day-to-day cooperation, but remain underused for mentoring, facilitation, or sustained engagement.

The findings also point to **clear gaps in digital competences among municipality officers**. Basic digital literacy is generally present, but more advanced skills are uneven or missing. Officers often need stronger competences in digital facilitation, online youth engagement, use of interactive tools,

online consultation platforms, data collection and analysis, and designing structured digital participation processes. In Italy, this includes a lack of familiarity with dedicated e-participation tools and collaborative decision-making platforms. In Romania, participants highlighted the need for stronger skills in using online surveys, voting tools, social media engagement, content creation, and facilitation of online activities. In Croatia, officers emphasised the need to understand how digital tools can support consultation, advocacy, outreach, and participation, rather than only communication. In Cyprus, digital skills vary significantly among officers, leading to uneven practices across local authorities.

Institutional barriers further limit the strategic use of digital tools. In Italy, outdated administrative procedures, limited budgets, slow procurement processes, data protection rules, internal software restrictions, and resistance to change can prevent municipalities from adopting more flexible or innovative digital approaches. In Croatia, a key barrier is the mismatch between fast digital communication and slow administrative procedures. Young people expect quick responses, while municipal systems often operate through formal, slower, and regulated processes, which can create frustration and reduce motivation. In Romania and Cyprus, there is limited evidence of explicit formal restrictions, but digitalisation is not systematically embedded in institutional practices. Instead, it relies largely on individual initiative, local habits, and available resources.

Resource and infrastructure limitations are also important, particularly in smaller or rural municipalities. Romania highlights insufficient technical equipment, inadequate facilities, and limited resources for hybrid or digital participation. Italy also notes that smaller municipalities may lack the budget and infrastructure needed for more advanced digital participation tools. In all countries, **the absence of dedicated youth participation roles and digital participation strategies means that officers often prioritise basic administrative tasks over experimentation with more innovative digital methods**.

Overall, the digital dimension of youth participation is **present but underdeveloped**. The existing use of digital tools shows that there is a strong foundation for more flexible, accessible, and continuous cooperation with young people. However, the current practice remains largely limited to communication, coordination, and promotion. To strengthen meaningful youth participation, municipality officers need practical guidance on how to move from basic digital communication toward structured digital engagement. This includes using digital tools for consultation, outreach, facilitation, co-creation, feedback collection, advocacy, and broader inclusion of young people beyond the existing members of youth councils.

Category	Croatia	Italy	Cyprus	Romania
General use of digital tools	Digital tools are widely used, but mostly for logistical coordination and information sharing.	Digital tools are increasingly used, but unevenly across municipalities and mostly informally.	Digital tools are present, but their use remains basic and focused on communication and coordination.	Digital tools are widely used to support communication, coordination, and engagement.
Main tools used	WhatsApp, Viber, Zoom, online surveys, scheduling	WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom,	Viber, email, telephone, Zoom, Facebook,	WhatsApp, email, Zoom, Google Meet, Facebook,

	tools, and other simple interactive platforms.	Google Meet, Google Drive, and email.	Instagram, and municipal or youth council social media accounts.	Instagram, and sometimes online surveys or voting tools.
Primary purpose of digital tools	Maintaining day-to-day contact, organising meetings, collecting quick feedback, and supporting members who are geographically dispersed.	Daily communication, outreach, promotion, online meetings, document exchange, and collaboration on proposals.	Scheduling meetings, sharing information, maintaining contact, promoting activities, and supporting basic coordination.	Quick communication, sharing updates, organising meetings, sending documents, promoting activities, and maintaining visibility.
Level of strategic use	Low. Digital tools are rarely used for structured consultations, deliberation, or co-creation.	Low to moderate. Tools are often used ad hoc rather than within a structured digital participation strategy.	Low. Digital tools are not systematically embedded into youth participation practices.	Low. Digital tools are mainly practice-driven and not part of a structured digital engagement framework.
Use for meaningful participation	Limited. Tools are mostly operational, not used systematically for broader engagement or participatory decision-making.	Limited. Advanced tools for e-participation, collaborative decision-making, or structured online consultation are not commonly used.	Limited. Tools are rarely used for mentoring, facilitation, or sustained participatory engagement.	Limited. Interactive tools for surveys, voting, and active participation are used less frequently and not systematically.
Digital competences of officers	Basic competences are present, but officers need stronger skills in using digital tools for participation, outreach, and advocacy.	Officers usually have basic operational skills, but lack advanced competences in digital facilitation and e-participation.	Basic digital literacy is generally sufficient, but competences vary significantly among officers.	Officers have basic communication skills, but need stronger competences in interactive tools, online facilitation, and digital engagement.
Social media use	Used informally, mostly for communication or visibility, but not as part of a structured engagement strategy.	Facebook and Instagram are used for outreach, promotion, and collecting feedback from young people.	Use varies: some municipalities use official accounts and tag youth councils, while others leave social media entirely to young people.	Facebook and Instagram are used to share information, promote activities, and reach young people.
Institutional barriers	Slow administrative procedures and lack of strategic	Outdated procedures, limited budgets, slow	No explicit restrictions, but digital tools are not	Few explicit restrictions, but lack of strategies,

	guidelines create a gap between digital communication and municipal decision-making.	procurement, data protection rules, internal software restrictions, and resistance to change.	systematically integrated into institutional practices.	guidelines, resources, and infrastructure limits digitalisation.
Resource and infrastructure barriers	Digital infrastructure exists, but structured support for digital participation is missing.	Smaller municipalities may lack budget, infrastructure, and approved tools for digital participation.	Basic tools are available, but quality depends on local practices and officers' individual capacities.	Smaller or rural communities may lack equipment, facilities, and resources for hybrid or digital participation.
Main challenge	Moving from informal digital coordination to meaningful digital participation.	Moving from ad hoc tool use to structured and inclusive digital participation strategies.	Moving from basic communication to purposeful digital engagement and facilitation.	Moving from basic communication tools to systematic digital consultation and youth engagement.
Overall assessment	Digital practices are present, but underused for consultation, co-creation, and broader participation.	Digitalisation has potential, but remains uneven and limited by institutional and capacity barriers.	Basic digital infrastructure exists, but strategic use for youth participation remains weak.	Digital tools are common, but not yet fully integrated into participatory youth work.

Recommendations for the MOOC Design

Across the four partner countries, the findings clearly indicate that the MOOC for municipality officers should be **practical, modular, and directly applicable to everyday work with youth councils**. While a basic conceptual introduction to youth participation, participatory governance, and the role of youth councils is necessary, all countries emphasise that **the course should not be overly theoretical**. Municipality officers need learning content that helps them respond to **concrete situations they face in practice**: how to communicate with young people, organise and sustain youth councils, facilitate meetings, support youth autonomy, engage decision-makers, use digital tools, and translate youth input into policy-relevant outcomes.

A first mandatory area of the MOOC should focus on the **foundations of youth participation and the role of youth councils**. This module should explain the purpose, mandate, and limits of youth councils, as well as their place within local governance structures. In Italy, this includes understanding legal and institutional frameworks for youth engagement at Italian and EU levels, while in Romania the emphasis is on clarifying the role and functioning of youth councils and promoting youth participation as a meaningful process rather than a formal requirement. In Croatia, where youth councils are formally established but operationally fragile, the module should help officers move beyond legal compliance and understand how youth councils can become active

contributors to local policy-making. In Cyprus, a basic module on understanding youth participation is also seen as useful, but it should be concise and connected to practical realities.

A second core area should address **the roles and responsibilities of municipality officers**. The MOOC should support the shift from seeing officers only as administrative coordinators toward recognising their role as facilitators, mentors, mediators, and connectors between young people and institutions. This is especially important in Croatia, where officers often already perform mentoring and facilitation tasks without sufficient guidance, and in Romania, where their role includes communication, mediation, and coordination within the administrative framework. In Cyprus and Italy, the course should similarly help officers understand how to provide support without replacing youth initiative, and how to strengthen cooperation between youth councils and local authorities.

Communication and youth engagement should be one of the strongest practical components of the MOOC. Across all countries, participants emphasise the need for real-life examples, scenarios, scripts, and step-by-step guidance on how to communicate with young people, build trust, encourage initiative, and maintain motivation. In Cyprus, soft skills such as active listening, adaptability, and youth-friendly communication were identified as particularly important. In Romania, communication should be linked to trust-building and active participation, while in Croatia it should also address the mismatch between slow administrative processes and young people's expectations for faster responses. Italy highlights the importance of managing group dynamics and ensuring that youth input is heard and translated into meaningful follow-up.

Another essential module should focus on **facilitation of participatory processes**. This should include practical methods for designing and running meetings, facilitating dialogue, managing group dynamics, resolving conflicts, encouraging less active members, and ensuring that discussions lead to concrete outcomes. Rather than presenting facilitation as theory, the MOOC should include exercises, facilitation scripts, examples of meeting formats, and tools that officers can immediately apply. This module should also address the challenge of supporting youth councils without taking over their responsibilities, which is especially relevant in contexts where young people depend heavily on administrative guidance.

The organisation and management of youth councils should also be treated as a practical module. The course should provide concrete tools for establishing and sustaining youth councils, recruiting members, organising meetings, preparing agendas and minutes, developing work programmes, planning budgets, and ensuring follow-up. Croatia specifically highlights the need for onboarding tools and templates for rules of procedure, work programmes, financial plans, and annual reporting. Romania similarly emphasises the need for templates for agendas, meeting minutes, recruitment strategies, and planning frameworks. Italy recommends practical examples of statutes, operational rules, meeting agendas, and feedback collection tools. Such materials should be downloadable and adaptable to different local contexts.

Digital participation should be included as a separate, hands-on module. The findings show that digital tools are already widely used for communication and coordination, but much less for structured participation. Therefore, the MOOC should demonstrate how existing tools can be used more strategically for engagement, consultation, outreach, feedback collection, hybrid meetings, and participatory decision-making. Romania highlights the need for tutorials on surveys, voting tools, and online meetings, while Italy points to digital consultation platforms, hybrid participation, and social media strategies. Croatia emphasises the need to move beyond coordination toward

using digital tools for meaningful engagement, advocacy, and participation. Cyprus similarly calls for practical and accessible guidance that helps officers use digital tools in a more purposeful way.

Inclusion and diversity should also be integrated across the MOOC, either as a dedicated module or as a cross-cutting theme. Officers need tools for reaching less active young people, engaging underrepresented groups, and adapting participation methods to different local realities, including rural, smaller, or resource-limited communities. Romania explicitly recommends practical strategies and case-based examples for engaging less active youth, especially in small or rural areas. Italy also emphasises inclusive practices, particularly in relation to young people from diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds. This part of the MOOC should avoid abstract discussion and instead provide outreach methods, inclusive communication examples, and adaptable engagement strategies.

The MOOC should also help officers understand the **institutional and political context of youth participation**. This is especially important because youth councils often have limited influence unless local authorities actively support them. The course should therefore include practical guidance on **institutional advocacy**, helping officers internally communicate the value of youth participation to elected politicians, municipal managers, and other decision-makers in order to secure stronger support, visibility, and resources. This includes strategies for engaging decision-makers, positioning youth councils within local governance, and supporting youth councils in moving beyond event-based activities toward policy contributions. Both Italy and Croatia strongly emphasise this need. In Croatia, particularly in relation to helping youth councils formulate proposals, engage with local regulations, and monitor the implementation of youth-related policies. Romania similarly highlights the importance of understanding governance structures, resource allocation, and the influence of political environments.

Monitoring and evaluation should form another practical component. Officers should be provided with ready-to-use feedback forms, indicators, reflection questions, and methods for assessing the quality and impact of youth council work. Romania particularly highlights the importance of tools for collecting feedback and improving the overall impact of youth councils. This module could also help officers document youth council contributions, communicate results to decision-makers, and make the value of youth participation more visible within local governance structures.

In terms of format, **the MOOC should be short, modular, flexible, and easy to follow**. Croatia explicitly highlights the need for time-efficient learning units that reflect the limited capacity and workload of municipality officers. Video-based content, short lessons, downloadable templates, checklists, guidelines, case studies, and practical exercises are recommended across the countries. Cyprus also emphasises the value of real-life examples, scenarios, tips, and video-based content. The course should allow officers to access specific resources when they need them, rather than requiring them to follow a long theoretical sequence.

Good practice examples should be included throughout the MOOC. Italy recommends examples from Italian municipalities and regions with more developed youth forums, such as Emilia-Romagna, Puglia, and parts of Tuscany, as well as European examples from countries with strong youth participation ecosystems, such as Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands. Romania emphasises the need for examples from small or resource-limited communities, especially where realistic and adaptable solutions have been applied. Cyprus recommends examples that show how municipalities successfully motivate young people, strengthen initiative, and sustain participation

in youth councils. Croatia highlights the value of examples that show how youth councils can move from organising events to influencing local policies.

Peer learning should be considered as an additional element of the MOOC design. Croatia identifies peer exchange as particularly valuable because municipality officers often lack opportunities to learn from comparable contexts. Live online sessions, discussion forums, short reflection tasks, or examples from other municipalities could support this. Such elements would also help officers understand that many of their challenges are shared across countries and can be addressed through practical exchange rather than isolated effort.

Finally, **certification should be included as a motivational and professional development element**. Cyprus and Croatia explicitly highlight the importance of formal recognition of learning outcomes. Assessment components, short quizzes, practical assignments, or reflection exercises could help distinguish levels of engagement and reinforce the value of completing the course. Certification would not only motivate participation, but also contribute to recognising the role of municipality officers in supporting meaningful youth participation.

Overall, the MOOC should function less as a theoretical course and more as **a practical toolkit for everyday work**. It should combine basic conceptual orientation with concrete methods, templates, examples, and guidance that help municipality officers support youth councils more effectively. Its main added value should be to strengthen officers' capacity to facilitate meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable youth participation within the real institutional constraints of local governance.

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Annex – focus group protocol template

The objective of the WP2 research is to **identify the institutional, organisational, and competence-related needs of municipality officers working with youth councils**, in order to adapt the Democracy Reloading Toolkit and develop a practice-oriented MOOC that supports meaningful youth participation in local decision-making.

Based on the main research question, the specific research questions are:

1. How is youth participation through local/regional youth councils, structured and implemented in practice within the national and institutional context of each partner country (Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Romania)?

2. What roles do municipality officers actually have when working with youth councils, and what challenges and barriers affect their ability to support meaningful youth participation?

3. Which skills, knowledge, and tools are currently missing among municipality officers, and how can these gaps be addressed?

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are a facilitated discussion and work well when the topic can be well scoped. They differ from one-on-one and group interviews in that they capitalize on communication between participants to generate understandings (but not necessarily consensus) about the research topic being discussed. Focus groups have proven particularly effective for research that seeks to explore ideas, concepts and where there is a desire to create shared meanings about issues through discussing them with others.

Number and type of participants: at least 5 municipality officers working with youth councils per focus group per country

GENERAL INFORMATION AND USEFUL TIPS BEFORE STARTING

LOCATION

It is best to hold focus groups in a comfortable and neutral space, and to provide refreshments (this is a comfort consideration but can also motivate someone to attend). Ensure that there is water available for participants, and if you are providing catering (even if it's just tea/coffee and biscuits), make sure this is in place before you begin so it does not disrupt the process.

Consider that your participants will be more motivated to attend if the focus group is held in a convenient location and at a reasonable time.

Make sure to ask your participants for any adjustments you need to set up before the focus group. Ensure that they have the access they need (e.g. book a space accessible to people who use wheelchairs if your participants need it).

The rooms should have appropriate lighting and ventilation. The environment should not be too noisy or distracting. The layout and furniture can affect the mood and manner of the group so make sure you minimize any external distractions (visual and auditory!). Take this into account before setting the date and time and inviting participants. There are no hard and fast rules about room layouts, but you should ensure that people are comfortable and that there is enough space so that they do not feel 'hemmed in' or stressed.

For online focus groups, you should use an appropriate program that meets the security requirements (personal data protection). Ideally, the program would also provide the option of recording (e.g. Zoom). If you decide not to record the meeting, make sure you include a colleague or a volunteer who will help you take notes so that you can analyse the results appropriately. Make sure that you and the participants have a stable Internet connection. Take a minute at the beginning to also explain the communication options of the program (how to turn on/off the microphone, how to use the chat and the hand-raising button if there's any.) The

participants must fill the application form for attending online meetings, along with the consent form. Don't forget to make a print screen of the „gallery" as a form of proof that the focus group has been held.

DURATION

The focus group should last for about **90 minutes,** with an option to prolong the meeting up to 30 minutes if needed.

Make sure to communicate the exact duration in advance so that the participants can plan to be present until the end.

MATERIALS

Digital recorder with new batteries and a spare set, or a mobile phone with full battery/a charger, in case you will be recording sound.

The attendance list and consent forms.

Any other background information that might be needed or handouts.

It's advised to have name badges.

Writing materials, flip-charts, white-board pens, sticky notes (post-it), and any other resources that might be needed.

RECORDING

You can record the sound (with a dictaphone or mobile phone), or just take notes of the conversation. You can also combine the two, so if you don't catch all the details in the notes, you can use the recording afterwards for a better analysis.

One person should take care that the recording is in process.

The facilitator should indicate the beginning of the recording and show the recording device.

If you record, it's not mandatory to make the whole transcription afterwards (which is time-consuming), but you can extract the most important parts and the main conclusions.

FACILITATION

When focus groups work well, they can produce new understandings. However, there is obviously a risk that the group dynamics will intimidate some participants, which is why the role of facilitation is extremely important. The focus group facilitation should help to ensure that the discussions are productive and beneficial to all participants (if certain people dominate, as the facilitator it's part of your role to draw out the more silent participants and manage any attempts to dominate the conversation).

The best method for asking questions is to make sure they are as open as possible. Questions do not need to be asked in the proposed order. The flow and the quality of the conversation might influence your choice of questions and timing.

The facilitator should avoid influencing the group's thoughts on the subject. Facilitators are not participants in the focus group and therefore should refrain from answering and/or leading participants' answers.

A good approach for the facilitator is to use a strategy of 'structured eavesdropping'; the more participant-led the discussion, the better. However, the facilitator also needs to ensure that the structure of the focus group is followed and all questions are covered in a reasonable time frame.

There are times when the facilitator might need to take a more interventionist approach (if the discussion gets heated or dries up, for example). The facilitator can try to get the group to discuss inconsistencies between participants and within their own thinking. Disagreements can lead to clarifications and new understandings if handled properly; misunderstandings can often be resolved by the participants themselves.

Reflection and seeking clarification are useful as they can encourage deeper thinking on key issues. Just be sure not to lead the group thinking or suggest answers.

It is important that you follow a clearly defined research question and sufficient evidence-based data (either from desk research or literature) to be able to identify the key themes for discussion.

Guide rather than rigidly structure the focus group; it is best to take an organic approach, encouraging conversation amongst participants and guiding them by using the provided questions or reflections as a prompt.

FOCUS GROUP TIMEFRAME

START Suggested time: 5 minutes	A focus group discussion will always start with an introduction from the facilitator about its purpose and process. • Welcome all the participants and introduce yourself and any other team members in the room, explaining their roles • Express gratitude for the participants' presence and emphasises the importance of their role in this research/project • Explain the general purpose of the discussion and why the participants were chosen. Shortly present the Participa project • Explain the presence and purpose of the audio recording equipment • Explain the structure of the focus group, the duration and outline any ground rules and discussion guidelines. These might include the importance of hearing everyone, speaking one at a time and that the moderator might interrupt to assure that all the topics can be fairly covered. • Review any housekeeping information or online technicalities. • Remind the participants to fill the attendance list (if the group is held physically) and consent forms. • Ensure that the group understands what will happen to the information – that it will be analysed in a report. Make it clear that no individual will be identified in any output from the research and that whilst what is said might be quoted it will be done in a way to ensure that it is anonymous.
DISCUSSION Suggested time: 80 minutes	• The facilitator reminds the group that there are no right-or-wrong answers and that everyone's opinions are important and valid. The participants can begin to talk without being called out, but the group members also need to give room for everyone to express themselves by being conscious of each other. • It is important to engage each and every participant at the beginning (at the 1st question) as it can direct the rest of the conversation. • At each main question, you can add questions for further explanation (*Can you explain/elaborate on that?*, *Could you tell us more about that?*), and also use paraphrasing (expressing, in our own words, the meaning we got from what someone said), reflections and naming emotions. • It's important to notice the body language too, and comment if needed (e.g. *I see you are all nodding, so I suppose you all agree.)*.
ROUNDING UP AND CLOSURE Suggested time: 5 minutes	• When all questions have been covered (or the allotted time is running out), the facilitator can point out the main conclusions. The participants can add their conclusions as well. • There can be a cooling-off period, during which participants should be encouraged to think about what has been said and reflect on the experience or to add any other comments that have not been heard earlier. • Opportunities can be provided for them to fill in the questionnaire, email thoughts or speak to the facilitator individually (following a period of reflection) to ensure that they have said everything that was on their mind (even if they did not say it during the group discussion).

	• The facilitator thanks again the participants and announces the next activities of the project.

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Introduction of the project:

This research is being undertaken as part of the Erasmus+ project „Empowering Youth Participation through Digital Transformation", by the project partners Association Delta (Croatia), Croatian youth network (Croatia), Cyprus youth council (Cyprus), Europiamo (Italy) and A4ACTION (Romania). The purpose of this focus group is ***to better understand how municipality officers work with youth councils in practice, what challenges they face, and what kind of support they need.***

Your experiences will help us adapt an existing methodology and develop ***a practical online course*** *to better support meaningful youth participation in local decision-making. This is one of the four focus groups that will be held in every project partner's countries. Your statements and experiences will be anonymised and included in a national report for each partner country, which will then be consolidated into a joint comparative report and used as a basis for developing an online course specifically designed for municipality officers working with youth councils. If after today you have any questions about what we are doing, feel free to contact us for further details.*

Read COE definition as a base:

*If we understand youth participation as young people having th****e "right, the means, the space, the opportunity,*** *and where necessary, the* ***support*** *to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society," as outlined in the Revised European Charter. It's about* ***empowering young individuals to exercise democratic citizenship*** *by developing life plans, influencing policies affecting them (like education), and actively contributing to their communities, not just as an end in itself, but as a means to societal change.*

Youth Participation & Institutional Context (10 minutes)	
Question:	**Notes:**
1. How is youth participation organised in your community/ municipality/ institution you work for, both in terms of practice and formal/legal framework? **Note:** how does the COE definition reflect your reality; if they do not mention, ask again for a formal/legal framework.	
Role of Municipality Officers & Cooperation with Youth Councils (15 minutes)	
2. What is your actual role when working with the youth council? **Please answer briefly and focus on your actual role!** **Note**: if not mentioned, ask if this is their main responsibility or one task among many; is their role clearly defined within the municipal structure.	
3. In what way do you cooperate with the youth council? Only on an administrative and logistical level, or as a mentor? **Please answer briefly and focus on the most typical situations and cooperation.** **Note**: if not mentioned, ask what forms and frequency of communication they use, how often do they have meetings.	
Challenges, Barriers & Political Context (20 minutes)	
4. What challenges and barriers in general are YOU facing as a responsible person for the youth council in your community/ municipality/ institution you work for? **Note**: if only mentioned regarding the youth council, ask regarding the municipality/local government, are there any misunderstandings about the role of the youth council (among young people, municipal staff or politicians).	

5. In your view, how much influence does the youth council currently have on decision-making in your community/ municipality/ institution you work for? **Note:** if not mentioned, ask what most often limits the impact of youth councils in their community.	
Skills, Knowledge Gaps & Digital Dimension (20 minutes)	
6. In your opinion, what knowledge and skills do municipality offices generally need to have to be able to work effectively with the youth council? **6.1.** What would help them not only in communication, but also in creating an active youth council that will, in the literal sense of the word, achieve youth participation.	
7. What digital tools do you use while working with the youth council? **For what purpose do you use them?** Is there any other? **7.1.** Are there institutional barriers to digital participation?	
MOOC Expectations (20 minutes)	
Introduction: *Since we are developing **a practical online course** (online educational module with several topics - MOOC) for people working with and are responsible for youth councils, we would like to draw on your experience. This is an opportunity for you to help shape a course that would be genuinely useful – both for your current work and for people who will take on this role in the future.*	
8. Based on your experience, what should every person who is working with youth council know or be able to do? **Think about what you consider essential today, as well as what you wish you had known when you started.**	
9. NOTE: It is necessary to pay special attention and review the following topics, AKS only if they are NOT mentioned previously. Use below check-list as a control: **9.1.** Do you think that understanding YOUTH PARTICIPATION should be part of this online course (what it is, why it matters, its key principles)? Why or why not? **9.2.** Do you think that information DEFINING WHAT THE YOUTH COUNCILS ARE needs to be a part of this online course – its definition for national and European level and its legal framework? **9.3.** Would practical tips, examples or "lessons learned" on how to achieve effective cooperation between local authorities and youth councils be useful for online courses, for your work? If yes, what kind of challenges or situations should be addressed? **9.4.** Do you think that guidelines for teaching you HOW TO USE TOOLS AND METHODS FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION will be useful?	
10. What would be the best way to present this content through an online course? How do you imagine the balance and presentation of the theoretical and practical content? **What are your preferred formats (e.g. shot videos, case studies, practical exercises, templates, peer examples)?**	

10.1. What would be ideal overall duration of this online course (in a sense of total time commitment)	
11. Would you be more likely to complete this course if it was certified or recognised institutionally? Short answer with YES/NO and why?	
11. What would you like to be able to do better after completing this kind of online educational module? Feel free to think in terms of skills, knowledge, confidence in specific situations, or changes in how you approach cooperation with youth councils.	
Ending (5 minutes)	
12. Is there anything important we did not ask but should know?	

Thank you for your participation and your inputs!

If you want any additional information about the research findings, please feel free to contact us!

Participa

Comparative joint research study

Needs Mapping for Municipality Officers Working with Youth Councils

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