

## Civic participation in later life. The Romanian case

How civically involved are Romanian older adults? Before answering the question, it is important to understand what we mean by civic participation and the role it plays in our lives.

Participating in protests, advocating for causes, taking action to protect the environment, and volunteering to help vulnerable people are just a few concrete examples of civic participation. While the list is extensive, what all these actions have in common is that they are aimed at improving the life of people and the communities in which they live [1](#). This brings us to a further reflection. Crucially, civic participation should be distinguished from civic engagement, as they refer to two different, albeit connected, concepts. Civic engagement refers to a general interest in civic matters, while participation implies effective behaviors [2](#). Because of its pragmatic nature, civic participation is beneficial for both societies and democracies. Consequently, it is promoted by many entities, including the European Union which recognizes and promotes it through initiatives such as the European Citizens' Initiative. Being engaged and contributing through concrete actions is not only beneficial for a cause and society as a whole, but it also has positive effects on the participants themselves by increasing self-esteem, psychological empowerment, and general well-being.

### Civic participation in later life

Civic participation spans all age groups. Regarding involvement among older citizens, international organizations such as WHO have stressed its beneficial effect on improving quality of life during the aging process. This is also supported by research in gerontology, which has shown the positive effects of an active civic life on physical and mental health.

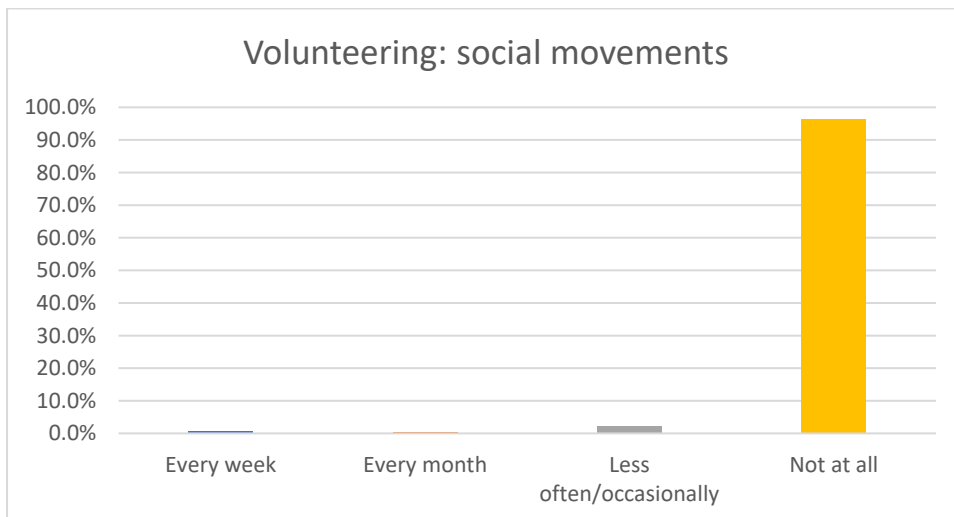
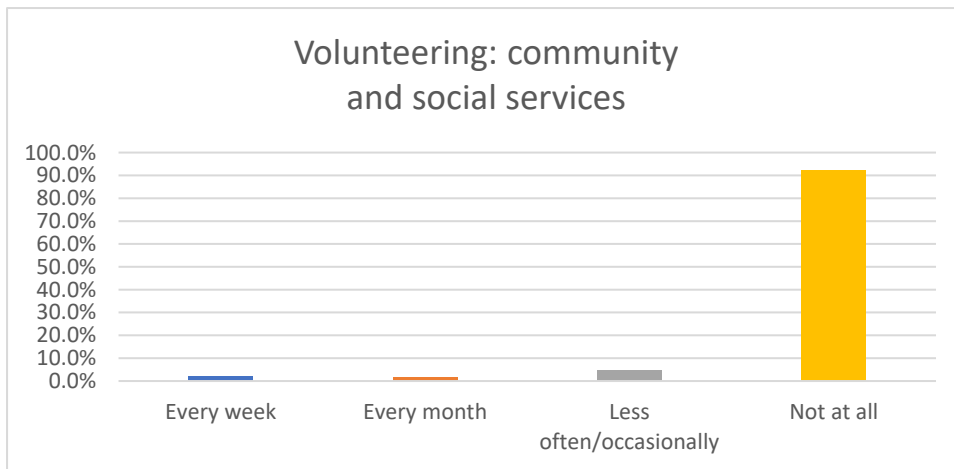
At the same time, being in good health incentivizes active participation. Characteristics such as good health status, higher income, and higher education are sociodemographic factors frequently associated with volunteering among older adults.

Even in cases of good health and the presence of other key resources, additional factors can pose obstacles to the active civic participation of older adults. For example, family demands, often related to caregiving responsibilities for a family member, or limited access to public transport can hinder involvement. Furthermore, older people may be perceived as a burden by organizations, institutions, and society at large. This phenomenon is known as ageism: a set of specific attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes based on an individual's age. While ageism can affect any age group, when it is directed toward older adults, it significantly limits their potential contribution to society.

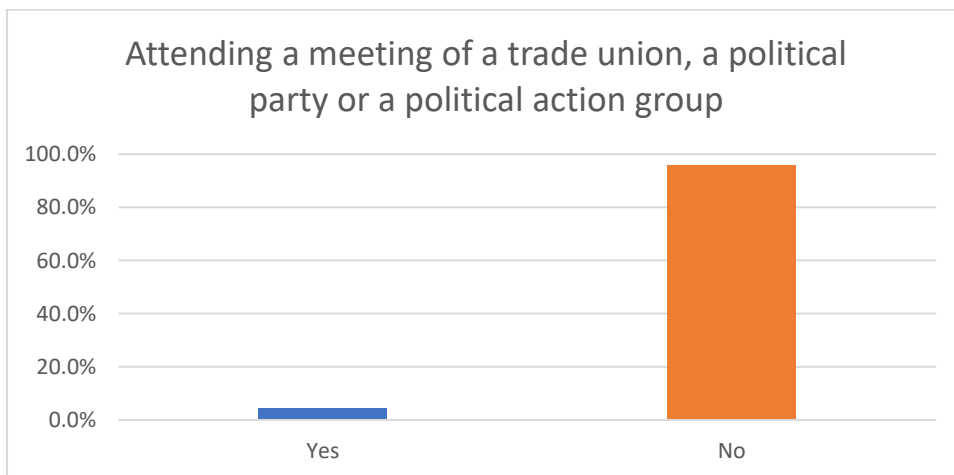
### The Romanian case

Given these premises, what can be said about civic participation in later life in Romania? Compared to Northern and Western Europe, Eastern European countries show low levels of both political participation and volunteering [3](#).

The most recent comprehensive data from the EQLS 2016 (European Quality of Life Survey) present a picture of Romanian older adults (50+) that is consistent with this trend. Specifically, over 90% of the sample does not participate in unpaid activities within social movements, educational organizations, or community and social service groups.



A similar situation emerges regarding political activities, including both formal participation—such as attending meetings of trade unions, political parties, or political action groups—and more informal actions, such as participating in boycotts.





Can we conclude that Romanian older adults are not involved in any form of civic engagement? Not necessarily. Such a conclusion would be a rushed response.

### Hidden participation: alternative ways found in Romania empirical data

Although the data may seem alarming, there is an explanation for this apparent lack of interest in typical and formal modes of participation. It is likely rooted in the country's communist past. During that era, civic involvement was not the result of citizens' free choice. The regime controlled all associations, trade unions, and the Party. Consequently, volunteering and participating in political demonstrations were mandatory [4](#). Over time, this produced a rejection of public life and a withdrawal from it in favor of the private spheres of life and family [5](#). Consequently, this coercion undermined the intrinsic value of volunteering, leading to its perception as a detrimental practice rather than a beneficial one for the population [6](#). And of course, this did not improve immediately after the fall of the regime. It appears that the number of years spent under communism has a lasting effect on the lack of civic participation. This accounts for adults, and especially older adults, who were socialized and spent a significant portion of their lives under the Ceaușescu regime.

However, we can examine this matter from another angle. Besides the conventional ways of contributing to society discussed above, there are many other actions that have a positive impact on others. Offering small amounts of money or preparing a hot meal for people in need are just two examples of social contribution. While these forms of contribution, addressed to those nearby, have a smaller impact compared to institutionalized forms of participation, they remain highly relevant.

A qualitative study<sup>1</sup> conducted in 2021 in Romania involved 50 people aged 50 and over. Through interviews, the research investigated various aspects of the lives of older Romanians in both rural and urban areas. Alongside social relations, material resources, health and social services, neighborhood and community, the study also considered civic participation. As expected, formal ways of participation were almost entirely absent from the participants' accounts. Even regarding voting or relations with local authorities, they expressed a lack of trust. At the same time, even participation in church, which is often regarded as an indicator of civic participation, can be ambivalent and can highlight a lack of trust in the institution itself [7](#).

Despite this, the informants' narratives are filled with examples of prosocial activities outside of conventional settings, mostly informal and directed toward those in their immediate circles. These

<sup>1</sup> The study is part of the project [AMASE](#) - A multidimensional approach to social exclusion in later life – health consequences for ageing populations

individuals, often equipped with very limited resources, offer what they have to others in similar conditions, who usually reciprocate. They assist neighbors with food and everyday chores, lend small amounts of money, or share relevant information. In rural areas, for example, a vital form of help comes from villagers with cars, as there are often no other means to reach larger localities. These individuals practice a form of intra-group solidarity, and although these are small-scale actions, they are vital for the immediate community.

In conclusion – back to the question that opened this text - while Romanian older adults are not civically involved in conventional ways or formal settings, this likely stems from the country's recent past and the forced nature of civic involvement during communism, which alienated citizens from public life. Yet, if we widen our perspective, we see that solidarity and support are active—mostly directed toward members of a small community, even if they occur without a conscious "civic" intention.

#### **Hidden participation in later life could look like:**

- Support and mutual assistance activities
- Support in case of major events
- Helping with grocery shopping for others
- Helping with household chores
- Sharing important information
- Lending small amount of money
- Offering food, clothes or other items

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