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April 2025

# Young people in Romania

*Gender differences, political participation  
and upholding democratic values*



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# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 Explanations of gender differences in political participation, interest and political choices in the literature	4
<b>2. Methodological framework</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. Profiles of young people in Romania by gender – statistics and official data</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4. Gender differences at the level of political participation</b>	<b>9</b>
4.1 Interest in and knowledge about politics	9
4.2 Left–right orientation	11
4.3 Values associated with the left–right dimension	13
4.4 Supporting social and interventionist policies	15
4.5 The relationship between gender and support for democratic values	16
<b>5. Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>24</b>
References	26
About the authors	27

# 1.

## Introduction

Given the diversity of young people's experiences, generalising about their needs and interests requires a complex and ambitious approach. Gender studies offer a deeper understanding of the most important issues that, in different ways, affect women and men. They take into account not only differences in behaviour and perception, but also the ways in which these differences affect social and political structures. Research in this area is essential to understanding how we can build a more democratic and equitable society for women and men by exploring the distinct socialisations, power relations and inequalities that persist in political and social systems.

When talking about women's rights and gender equality in Romania, we cannot ignore a worrying statistic: Romania ranks last in the European Union in terms of gender equality, according to the 2024 Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).<sup>1</sup> Romania scores 57.5 points out of 100, while Sweden, ranked first, scores 82 points. Romania fares better, out of the categories analysed, in relation to income gaps, labour market and time. The worst score, by contrast, is in relation to »power«, on which it scores only 32.8 points out of 100. This category assesses women's power in the political, economic and social spheres.

In Romania, people's views on gender equality are quite diverse. The Gender Barometer (2018) conducted by the Filia Center found that a mix of traditional beliefs and more modern values persists in society, especially regarding the expectations and social norms that women and men are expected to conform to.<sup>2</sup> These categories reflect a wide range of attitudes, from the most open to gender issues to the most reluctant. Analysing by sub-samples of women and men, the Barometer revealed gender differences in terms of perspectives. What men prioritise or define as a social norm, for example, is not always shared by women. For example, the Gender Barometer indicates that women put more emphasis on health care spending, while men prioritise infrastructure more. Women are also generally more open to voting other women into leadership positions in parliament and central government, although the majority of respondents say that a candidate's gender does not matter.

In 2024, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, with polling company IPSOS, conducted a large survey among young people in 12 countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, including Romania. On the basis of this survey, in October 2024 FES Romania published the *Romanian Youth Survey 2024. Opinions, fears and aspirations of young people in a Romania of social inequalities*.<sup>3</sup> It contained valuable information on how young Romanians today relate to various aspects of life, including education, work, migration and civic and political participation.

This is a continuation of that study, processing the IPSOS database on young people in Romania. We have extracted gender-segregated data to examine the political orientation of young people today and how they relate to civic and political participation, and to see whether there are differences in levels of support for democratic values.

The point of departure for our approach derives from the international debate, especially in Western countries, on the reported more left-wing and progressive orientation among young women in contrast to the inclination towards authoritarianism and higher support for the far right among young men.

Our study this analyses the ideological positioning and political interests of young men and women (aged 14–29) in Romania. We investigate how these two categories position themselves in relation to democratic values, social and political institutions, social policies and their voting tendencies. We would like to determine whether female voters support democratic processes; whether young male voters tend to be more right-wing and authoritarian; and the extent to which the rise of the far right is gendered.

The study examines the influence of gender experiences on political orientation and voter turnout, analysing the relationship between democratic values, gender roles and ideological positioning. Research on how gender differences are reflected in political behaviour and preferences is crucial to understanding how voters will react when they perceive that their political interests and needs are not represented or are underrepresented.

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024/RO>.

<sup>2</sup> Filia Center (2018): *Gender Barometer*; available at: <https://centrulfilia.ro/new/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Barometru-de-gen-2018-Centrul-FILIA.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Bădescu, Gabriel/Umbreș, Radu/Voicu, Mălina/Tușiș, Claudiu (2024): *The Romanian Youth Survey 2024. Opinii, temeri și aspirații ale tinerilor, într-o Românie ale inegalităților sociale*; available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/21471-20241212.pdf>.



The results of this study contribute to the debate on the poor reflection of young women's specific political interests and perspectives in the political system. It also highlights the underrepresentation of future female voters in both electoral research and political life, in which women are often treated as marginal actors. Their concerns are frequently perceived as invisible or considered private. As a result, many problems generally confined to the private sphere do not find solutions in the public and political arenas. The lack of representation of women's interests thus constitutes a gender injustice that requires corrective action.

Gender equality is a crucial element in a country's democratisation. Efforts to increase civic and political participation are inadequate if they do not also try to reduce the barriers that stand in the way of girls and women asserting themselves in the public sphere. These barriers manifest themselves directly or indirectly in the form of persistent gender stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination. These include the assumptions that men are the natural head of the family or have better leadership qualities, but also the various forms of violence against women.

Although democratic institutions emerged before gender equality was consolidated, they have played a key role in promoting it. Democracy does not automatically lead to gender equality, but it creates an enabling environment for social and cultural change that may reduce inequality. A concrete example is the greater participation of women in politics in democratic societies compared with less democratic ones. However, the inequality-reducing effect is not permanent: the process is continuous and dependent on other factors (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Clayton 2021).

## 1.1 Explanations of gender differences in political participation, interest and political choices in the literature

Political participation can be understood as a broad space of action in which individuals manifest their political intentions (i) actively, through political representation or (in)direct actions, such as voting, involvement in political groups or parties, demonstrations, petitions or boycotts, or (ii) passively, through their behaviour towards others, the ways in which they interact with each other and with institutions.

A number of studies correlate women's lower voter turnout and lower political participation with factors such as the influence of religion, their close association with the private sphere, caring responsibilities, domestic work and lower labour market participation (Inglehart and Norris 2000; Studlar et al. 1989). Gender socialisation further reinforces the belief that politics is not a domain for women and that they lack the capacity to fully understand it (Sapiro cited in Otjes and Rekker 2021). However, voter

turnout has fluctuated significantly in elections in different countries (Bertoli et al. 2020; Blais and Achen 2019; Dassonneville 2012, 2018). More recent studies show that women are increasingly participating in elections, often similar to or even more than men, especially in urban areas (Burciu and Hutter 2023; Giger 2009; Oshri et al. 2023). Gender differences in political participation remain complex, with younger women more likely to vote for progressive or left-wing parties, reflecting broader European trends (Burciu and Hutter 2023; Giger 2009; Oshri et al. 2023).

Despite these changes, theoretical frameworks as applied to political behaviour often omit the importance of gender in voter turnout and ideological alignment. They also fail to consider the extent to which women, as an intersectional category, challenge existing models of voting rationality. Traditional notions of the so-called »rational« and »objective« voter frequently reflect a masculinised perspective that legitimises itself by shaping and reinforcing dominant norms in society. Rationality and objectivity, as ideals of knowledge production, have historically been ascribed primarily to men, particularly those from racially privileged and class privileged backgrounds. This politically charged history, which has recorded and sustained larger systems of inequities, provides a crucial basis for feminist critiques in epistemology and philosophy of science (MacKinnon 1991; Nye 2004; Rooney 2017).

### 1.2.1 Gender socialisation and political choice

Feminist theories associated with the ethics of care offer models of the different lived experiences of women and men, explaining how gender socialisation affects political choices and ideological inclination. The ethics of care is a theoretical and moral approach that emphasises inter-human relations and caring for others as a human responsibility. It takes into account the needs and vulnerabilities of individuals. In contrast to theories based on universal principles, the ethics of care focuses on the particular context and connections between people or institutions, connections defined by autonomy and (in)dependence; it is thus a relational ethics. According to Chodorow (1978), the traditional division of labour and the process of socialisation in public and private spaces influence how women and men relate to society. Through gendered socialisation, women are often associated with private space and care work, with an emphasis on relationships and collaboration, whereas men are associated with public space. Men thus develop an individualistic view of the self and a greater tendency to perceive themselves as isolated individuals.

If the nature of the space in which gender roles manifest themselves has a significant impact on the behaviour of women and men, with women thus tending to think more relationally and men more abstractly, we should observe

the same differences in how the two genders approach and do politics. Sara Ruddick (1989), a theorist who studies the impact of motherhood, argues that the role of mothering causes women to think about society and politics from a more altruistic and compassionate perspective, whereas men do not develop the same traits because their daily concerns are not so care-centred. Similarly, Gilligan (1982) argues that classical theories of justice and morality have excluded women and their perspectives, thus promoting a masculinised version of morality and justice that emphasises autonomy, independence and freedom, and viewing interdependence and interpersonal relationships as obstacles. These authors suggest that women will be more likely than men to approach politics in a relational way, thus prioritising socially oriented solutions over individualistic ones focused on competition and gain. This also influences their ideological positioning (Campbell 2006).

Long-term structural and cultural trends that have transformed the lives of women and men have gradually led to a realignment of gender politics in post-industrial societies. After the Second World War, there was a tendency for women to move to the ideological right, under the influence of religion and the social division of labour. This was shown in a study by Inglehart and Norris (2000), which found that women in Western Europe tended to vote for conservative Christian Democratic parties because they attended churches associated with these parties. With the second wave of the feminist movement, which promoted difference and liberation (Miroiu 2004), as well as the gendered redistribution of jobs, women began to occupy more and more space in the workplace, on the street, in politics and in the knowledge field. This phenomenon raised the profile of gender issues and issues of concern to women, which until then had not addressed either politically or discursively. Thus, issues such as childcare, maternity/paternal leave, reproductive rights, sexual harassment, the »glass ceiling«, the pay gap and paid work began to feature in political discourse. Nevertheless, gender is still not considered sufficiently salient to be included in electoral discourse alongside topics such as class, religion or nativism.

### 1.2.2 Gendered (ir)rational voting and political values

Political behaviour is shaped by social factors, such as family and educational background, age of exposure to political ideas, as well as individual political needs and interests. In addition, significant external events – for example, the pandemic or inflation – can influence political choices. Perceptions of the future can also have a considerable impact on how young people relate to current political dynamics. Political formation and socialisation begin at an early age, which is why research should not be limited to the minimum voting age (Neundorf and Northmore-Ball 2021; Serra and Smets 2022).

Although voter turnout, as a traditional form of political engagement, is generally lower among young people, the young generation in Western countries are more active in other forms of non-institutionalised participation or protest actions, such as signing petitions or boycotting companies, personalities or products (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2003; Sloam 2014; Grasso 2016). Studies show that young people are not necessarily uninterested in politics, but prefer alternative forms of political involvement (O'Toole et al. 2003). These forms of political expression are disregarded in comparison with traditional forms, such as voting and political representation, even if they express a tendency to challenge the status quo. This occurs in a context in which existing political options do not seem viable for the younger generation, but where there is hope for change.

In the theory of voting behaviour, there are two categories of voting based on economic fluctuations:

1. So-called »pocketbook voting« (voting based on economic self-interest): voters opt for what will bring them greater financial gain or penalise the government by switching their vote after suffering an economic loss (Elinder, Jordahl and Poutvaara 2015). Downs (1957) confirms that »every citizen casts his vote for the party which he believes will benefit him more than any other« (p. 36).
2. *sociotropic voting*: the voter chooses the option that offers more welfare at the macro level and prioritises the economic situation of all over specifically personal gain (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Fiorina 1981).

Looking at the economics of voting through a gender lens, we observe that men tend to vote according to their personal economic interests (*pocketbook voting*), guided by direct gains and losses, while women, socialised to be more empathetic and caring, tend to vote sociotropically, taking into account the collective good rather than self-interest (Welch and Hibbing 1992; Chaney et al. 1998).

These theories have been developed mainly in the Western space, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. They do not necessarily apply to other contexts. Recent economic and political changes, as well as national particularities, seem to bear this out, in light of the diversity of political, historical and cultural contexts. In the United Kingdom, for example, since the 1980s political gender differentials have widened together with the changing economic climate of the Thatcher era and the process of deindustrialisation (Rose and McAllister 1990). This has led to the emergence of new occupations and the disappearance of others in which men were the main workforce. Social prestige shifted from occupation to income and, as a result, the social gender contract, along with conceptions of masculinity and femininity, have been destabilised.

But women are by no means a homogenous group and should not be studied as a static monobloc. Their interests vary in accordance with different structural factors, such as ethnicity, class, age, marital status, occupation or the existence of one or more children in their lives. These nuances help us to understand their political behaviour and the factors that lead them to support one candidate or party over another, but also the emergence of an ideological (re)alignment.

Research shows that the presence of young people in the labour market leads to changes in political interests, especially among occupationally active women. According to traditional gender roles, women are associated predominantly with childcare, as both paid and unpaid work. This is why they are more concerned than men with state-provided services (Banducci et al. 2016). While married women (especially those with children) tend to have more traditional values, as they share resources within the couple (Edlund et al. 2005), divorced or single women face more expenses to manage on their own and a different lifestyle. They thus tend to adopt progressive values and support leftist parties (Edlund and Pande 2002).

### **1.2.3 Gender differences in left-right orientation. Are young women more progressive?**

A plethora of studies and surveys in Western countries show gender differences in ideological orientation along the left–right axis and an increasing trend in the proportion of young women embracing liberal, left-wing values (Norris 1999; Inglehart and Norris 2000; Shorrocks 2018). In contrast, there is greater support for far-right parties and authoritarianism among men, especially young men (Abou-Chadi 2024).

Studying how women's and men's different socialisation and life experiences shape their political choices helps us to better understand their political behaviour. It can also help political actors – politicians and parties – to adapt their strategies to their electorates. At the same time, analysing these differences shows that the electorate is not homogenous and, moreover, that beyond differences in class, ethnicity, education, residence and age, the electorate may also behave differently according to gender.

In the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, however, left–right orientation does not always have the same connotation as in Western countries and is

therefore not sufficient to provide a clear picture of political positioning. This phenomenon is further emphasised by the fact that parties themselves have difficulty defining their own ideologies. In our analysis therefore we will not limit ourselves to analysing the left–right self-positioning of young people by gender, but will go further to see what values they share, thus obtaining a more precise framing of what is traditionally defined as left-wing (pro-equality, social solidarity, social policies and state intervention in the economy) or right-wing (encouraging competition, free market, a minimal state and so on).

In Western countries, studies have found that there are three stages in the dynamics of electoral behaviour, depending on gender (Inglehart and Norris 2000, 2003):

1. The traditional gender gap: women are more right-wing than men, in a context in which they are more religious and conservative – this was the situation in Western countries until the 1970s and in some until the 1990s.
2. Gender misalignment: various factors blur the differences in voting behaviour between women and men.
3. The modern gender gap: women are moving further to the left of the political spectrum in contrast to men. This state of affairs is now being observed in many Western countries, especially among young people.

The main causes of women's political migration from right to left are related to the decrease in religiosity in Western countries. In general, women tended to be more religious and conservative, opting for right-wing parties to a greater extent. This and other factors related to the process of emancipation may be added, such as labour market participation and outsourcing of care work, awareness of discrimination, and changes in family structure. In a 2023 research study of gender differences with regard to political orientation in Romania, based on a survey conducted by FES Romania, the data show a traditional gender gap: women are more right-wing than men, and there is even wider gap in the younger age group (18–34 years) than in the general population (Mihai 2024). In terms of social policies, however, women are more supportive of free public services, state interventionist policies aimed at reducing inequality, poverty, protection of the unemployed and access to housing. Finally women's interest in politics is lower.



## 2.

# Methodological framework

The study was based on data from a survey conducted in 12 countries by the polling company IPSOS, commissioned by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The target population comprised inhabitants aged between 14 and 29 in the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey, another condition was that the target group had access to the internet, as in these eight countries, the survey was based on computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI). For the CAWI module, the target audience was limited to persons who registered in an online access panel, who were resident in one of the EU Member States and who had access to online services on a digital input device at the time of the survey.

The use of online panels for CAWI is a widely accepted research methodology that is increasingly used by survey organisations.

The survey includes a total of 8,943 respondents, including 1,150 from Romania. Data were collected between 9 February and 25 March 2024.

The analyses in the study are based on survey data from Romania. For some of the most important indicators, the study presents comparisons between Romania and the other countries, as well as with a study conducted by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in 2018/2019, which covered ten countries, including Romania.

### 3.

## Profiles of young people in Romania by gender – statistics and official data

In 2024, Romania had a population of 3,279,270 young people aged between 14 and 29, representing 17 per cent of the total population, according to INS data. Of these, 52 per cent were men and 48 per cent women.

Statistics show that girls generally do better than boys at school. In recent years, the baccalaureate pass rate has been higher for girls, at 55 per cent, compared with 45 per cent for boys. This trend continues in higher education, where women account for 58 per cent of BAs, 62 per cent of MAs and 57 per cent of PhDs (NSI 2022). The dropout rate was 16.6 per cent in 2023, for both sexes, the highest in the European Union ([Eurostat 2023](#)).

In contrast, labour market participation is lower for girls and young women. In the third quarter of 2024, the participation rate in the 15–19 age group was 8.8 per cent for girls and 12.2 per cent for boys; 37 per cent for young women and 53.5 per cent for young men in the 20–24 age group; and 67.6 per cent for young women and 88.3 per cent for young men in the 25–29 age group (NSI 2024). The lower labour market participation rate of young women is partly because a higher percentage of them continue their education. But other factors are also in play, such as their greater social and family responsibilities, especially those related to raising children, as well as stereotypes and more limited access to job opportunities.

Gender segregation persists in the labour market for certain occupations. We lack data by age group to see how this is reflected among young people, but NSI data from 2023 on the whole employed population show that, not surprisingly, men are in the majority in construction (86 per cent of the total workforce), mining and quarrying (83 per cent) and transport and storage (76.5 per cent), while women dominate employment in education (73.5 per cent) and health care and social work (80 per cent). In other areas, such as real estate or administration and support activities, the gender distribution is more balanced.

In the 2024 parliamentary elections, voter turnout among young people aged 18–24 was almost equal between women and men, with male voters slightly ahead (348,194 men compared with 344,230 women).<sup>4</sup> In general, voter turnout in Romania is balanced between the two genders for all age groups, with the exception of the over 65s, among whom women outnumber men because of their higher life expectancy. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, the percentage of women candidates was 35 per cent (34.7 per cent of all Senate candidates and 37 per cent of all Chamber of Deputies candidates).<sup>5</sup> A total of 101 women were elected out of 465 Members of Parliament, representing 21.7 per cent of all MPs. This puts Romania at the bottom of EU league in terms of women's representation in Parliament.<sup>6</sup> Young people aged between 25 and 34 make up 6 per cent of all MPs elected to the 2024–2028 parliament, and the majority of MPs (56 per cent) are aged between 45 and 64.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> ASP <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/parlamentare01122024/presence/romania/stats>

<sup>5</sup> Expert Forum Report: <https://expertforum.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PB-186-candidati-parlamentare.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20250307-1>.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://hotnews.ro/cea-mai-tanara-membra-din-noul-parlament-are-23-de-ani-si-este-de-la-aur-anul-trecut-a-adus-gloante-in-parlament-cine-este-ariadna-cirligeanu-1859245>.

## 4.

# Gender differences at the level of political participation

### 4.1 Interest in and knowledge about politics

As various studies and research show, young people's interest in politics remains generally low. Our data show that, currently, 45 per cent of young people in Romania say they are not interested in politics, while only 18 per cent say they have a positive interest.<sup>8</sup> Although these figures are not encouraging, there is an upward trend compared with the results of the 2019 FES survey, when 76 per cent of young people said they were not interested in politics and only 9 per cent said the opposite, with the remaining percentages somewhere in the middle.

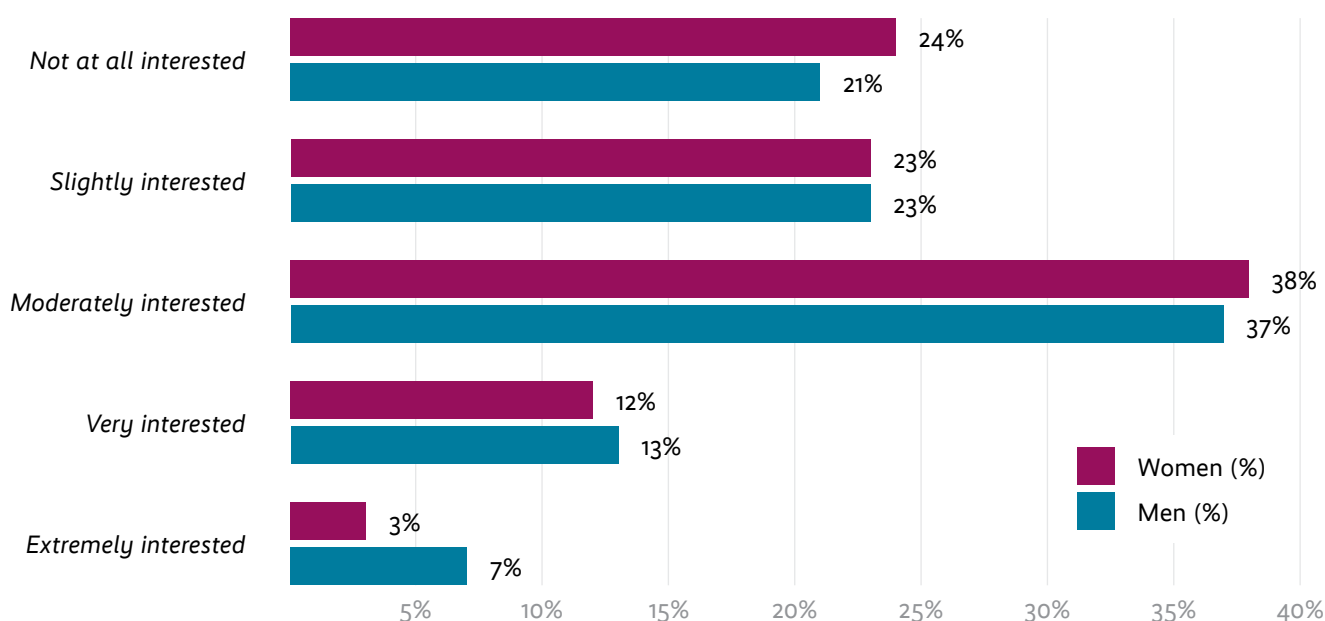
In terms of gender, young women show less interest in politics, but the difference is not significant: 46.7 per cent of young women say they are not interested at all or rather uninterested in politics, compared with 43.3 per cent of young men. On the other hand, only 15.5 per cent of young women and 19.8 per cent of young men consider politics a

particular area of interest. The remainder fall in the middle range, saying they are neither interested nor uninterested in politics.

Young women's lower interest in politics is not surprising, given that they feel less represented by a male-dominated political class, in terms of both their presence in decision-making positions and because the political agenda does not respond to women's needs and interests. Traditional gender socialisation also plays an important role: women are generally educated to take on more domestic and caring responsibilities, while patriarchal society discourages women's involvement in the public sphere. In fact, these patriarchal preconceptions – remnants of which are still alive today – were the main reason why, from the beginnings of democracy until the mid-twentieth century, women were excluded from the electoral process, deprived of the right to vote and other civil and political rights.

### How interested are you in politics?

Fig. 1



<sup>8</sup> The percentages of those (not) interested in politics were measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means total lack of interest and 5 very high interest. Lack of interest corresponds to percentages of respondents ticking 1 and 2, and interest to percentages ticking 4 and 5. The value 3 corresponds to respondents in the middle, neither interested nor uninterested.

Interest in politics is lower in rural areas than in urban ones. Furthermore, 53.2 per cent of rural female respondents say they are not interested in politics (in contrast to 42.5 per cent of male respondents) versus 42.2 per cent of urban female respondents (42.3 per cent of male urban respondents). These differences can be explained by the greater physical and symbolic distance that rural people feel from the decisions made by the political class at the centre, but also because traditional values are more persistent among rural women.

Coupled with the low interest in politics is a rather modest level of knowledge about politics: almost 40 per cent of respondents who self-assessed their knowledge say they know nothing or very little about politics (42 per cent of women and 37.5 per cent of men). At the other extreme, almost a third (29.7 per cent) of young men self-assess themselves as having good or very good knowledge about politics, while only 22.4 per cent of young women say this. In rural areas, the percentages of those who say they have a good or very good knowledge of politics are lower: 21 per cent of rural men and 17.6 per cent of rural women, respectively, rate their knowledge as good or very good.

At the regional level, not only in Romania, but in all 12 countries included in the survey we see high percentages of young people who are not interested in politics, with the majority exceeding 50 per cent. Gender differences are significant in countries such as Kosovo (51.5 per cent of men and 77.2 per cent of women are politically uninterested), Bosnia and Herzegovina (52 per cent of men and 63 per cent of women), North Macedonia (46.7 per cent of men and 62.3 per cent of women) and Montenegro (39.6 per cent of men and 58.4 per cent of women). In some countries, the percentage of women declaring an

interest in politics is extremely low, such as in Kosovo, where 6.5 per cent of young women declare an interest versus 18.6 per cent of young men. In almost all of the 12 countries surveyed, with the exception of Turkey (33 per cent), interest in politics among young people is higher among male respondents. In one country, Croatia, the percentage of those with no interest in politics is almost equal among both women and men (54 per cent).

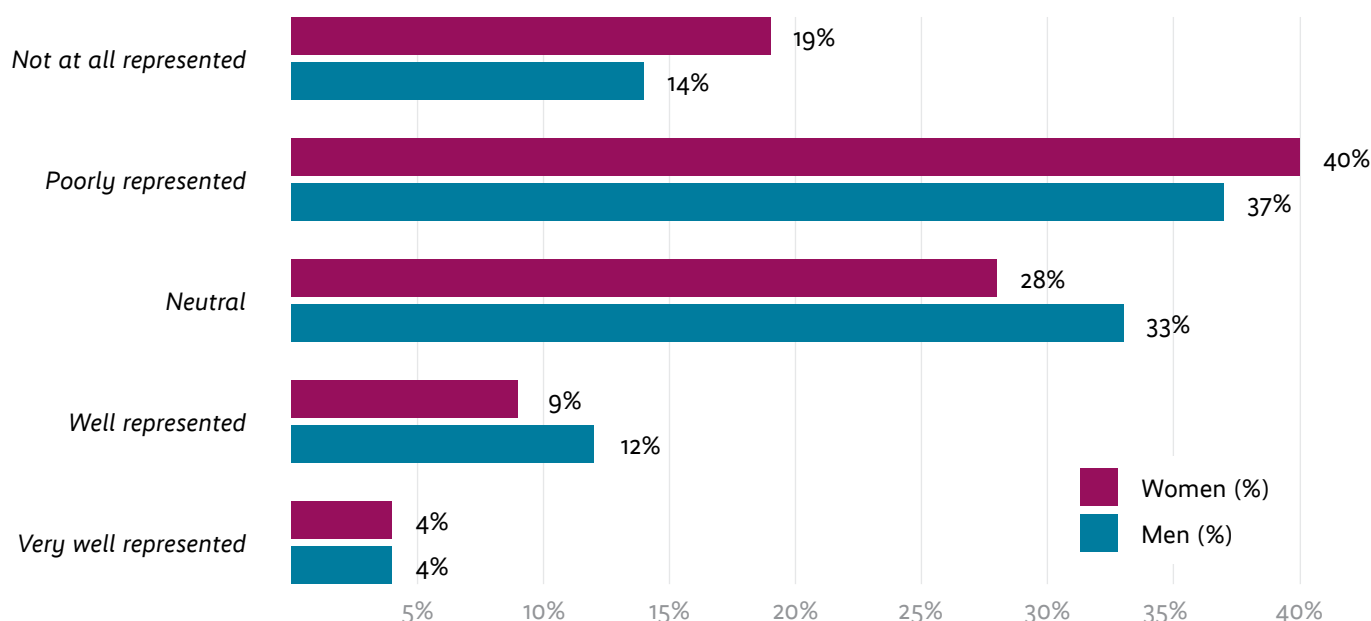
Linked to the low interest in politics is the way young people feel their interests are represented in politics. Recall that in the current 2024-2028 legislature, only 6 per cent of MPs are young people under 34. Here again, the data show a gender difference: 59 per cent of young women versus 50.7 per cent of young men in Romania say that their interests are not represented at all or very poorly represented, while only 13.4 per cent of women and 15.1 per cent of men say that their interests are well or very well represented politically.

We find this gender difference in all the countries analysed. The proportion of women who feel represented by the political class is lower than that of men, and the percentages of those who say they are represented are particularly low overall. It is noteworthy that a very small percentage, only 6 per cent, of young Croatian women say that their interests are well or very well represented politically (versus 11.1 per cent of Croatian men). This should ring serious alarm bells for the political class in this country.

Regarding the rural-urban component, as expected, rural young people of both sexes are more likely than their urban counterparts to say that their political interests are not represented in politics.

Fig. 2

## How well do you think young people's interests are represented in national politics?



### 4.3.1 Alternative forms of political participation

Young people's interest in politics is manifested not only in traditional forms of politics, such as voting, but also in alternative forms of engagement that emphasise community and political contestation (Inglehart and Norris 2003; O'Toole et al. 2003; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2003; Sloam 2014; Grasso 2016). In Romania, the data indicate low direct political engagement among young people: only 7.3 per cent of girls and 12.9 per cent of boys are politically active or members of a party.

In contrast, community involvement through volunteering or participation in NGOs is a more widespread form of involvement. Thus, 30 per cent of female respondents say that they volunteer and 27.5 per cent would like to get involved, while 32.9 per cent of the male respondents are involved and 26.5 per cent express this intention for the future. This type of engagement may be influenced by internship opportunities during university, which facilitate both professional training and the expansion of social networks, essential for the future prospects of 14–29 year olds.

Moreover, the motivation for such activities may be linked to the need to belong to a community, to find friends and common interests, or to fight the feeling of isolation, accentuated by a social system marked by neoliberal individualism. Organising events and getting involved in community networks not only respond to these needs but can also provide opportunities for personal and professional development.

When young people in Romania are asked about their involvement in different forms of political contestation, data shows that online petitions are the preferred method of rejecting the status quo. Some 32.5 per cent of women say they have signed online petitions and 18.5 per cent would like to do so in the future. Among men, 24.3 per cent say they already sign petitions and 27.7 per cent plan to do so in the future.

Another indirect form of political contestation, boycotting products for political or environmental reasons, has been adopted by 23.3 per cent of women, while 21.1 per cent say they would do so in the future. In the case of men, 18.3 per cent say they are already boycotting, while a higher 27.6 per cent say they would do so in the future.

As for direct forms of political contestation, such as protests and demonstrations, these are more common among men (21.3 per cent) than women (16.9 per cent). However, number of those intending to participate in demonstrations is higher: 31.5 per cent of men as against 21.5 per cent of women say they would like to take part in protests in the future.

Gender differences in the level of political participation can be seen in both direct forms of engagement, such as

political party activity and participation in demonstrations, and indirect forms, such as signing online petitions or politically or environmentally motivated economic boycotts. Women tend to prefer alternative forms of engagement that, while bringing them into the public space, offer them a greater degree of safety, in other words, a form of participation that minimises exposure, through either social networks or alternative, ideologically or environmentally motivated consumer choices. These forms are rather a latent form of political sanctioning of the status quo.

In contrast, men show a more pronounced inclination towards direct methods of political action, whether through involvement in political parties and groups, or participation in protests and other forms of physical demonstration. Although these behaviours seem to reflect the traditional binary between the public and the private sphere, the indirect forms of political participation practiced more frequently by women, at the intersection between the two spheres and indicating an active presence of women in political life, negate this dichotomy.

## 4.2 Left-right orientation

As noted in the introduction, positioning on the left-right political spectrum is becoming increasingly questionable in the current circumstances, in which the ideological identity of political organisations is constantly changing. In Eastern and Southern Europe, for example, this redefinition no longer complies with the traditional criteria of political categorisation, which are still found to a certain extent in Western European countries. Among young people in Romania, similar to the situation in other countries in the region, the data reveal political confusion with regard to familiar ideological identifications. Such confusion manifests itself in two essential ways: (i) a high percentage of young people who declare that they do not know or do not want to position themselves on the left-right axis; and (ii) a very high percentage of young people who prefer to define themselves politically as somewhere in the centre, thus avoiding a decision on whether they are on the right or the left.

The data show that 77 per cent of young people in Romania know where they stand on the left-right axis, while 22.8 per cent either don't know or don't want to say. The percentage of those who don't want to say or don't know where they stand is higher among young women, at 28.3 per cent (almost a third), compared with young men (17.7 per cent). The gender difference is not surprising if we look at what we have seen so far: young women are generally less interested in politics, have less knowledge of it and feel more strongly that their interests are poorly or not at all represented in the political arena.

This gender gap is observed in almost all the countries included in the survey, but is significantly higher in countries such as Kosovo, where 29.6 per cent of female respondents



do not know/do not want to position themselves on the left–right axis, while only 9.3 per cent of young Kosovar men are in this situation. Similarly in North Macedonia, 42.2 per cent of women versus 27.6 per cent of men answered that they do not know/do not want to say. Among the countries analysed we also find situations in which the gender gap is insignificant in this regard, such as Slovenia and Turkey.

Turning to the respondents who stated their position on the political left–right axis, making up 77 per cent of the total sample, we observe that half of them are in the centre (50.3 per cent). The left–right axis was presented on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 represents the extreme left and 10 the extreme right. The centre is represented by the numbers 5 and 6 on the scale.

From a gender perspective, there are almost no differences, as can be seen in Figure 3.

About half of young men (50.9 per cent) and young women (49.7 per cent) position themselves as centrist.

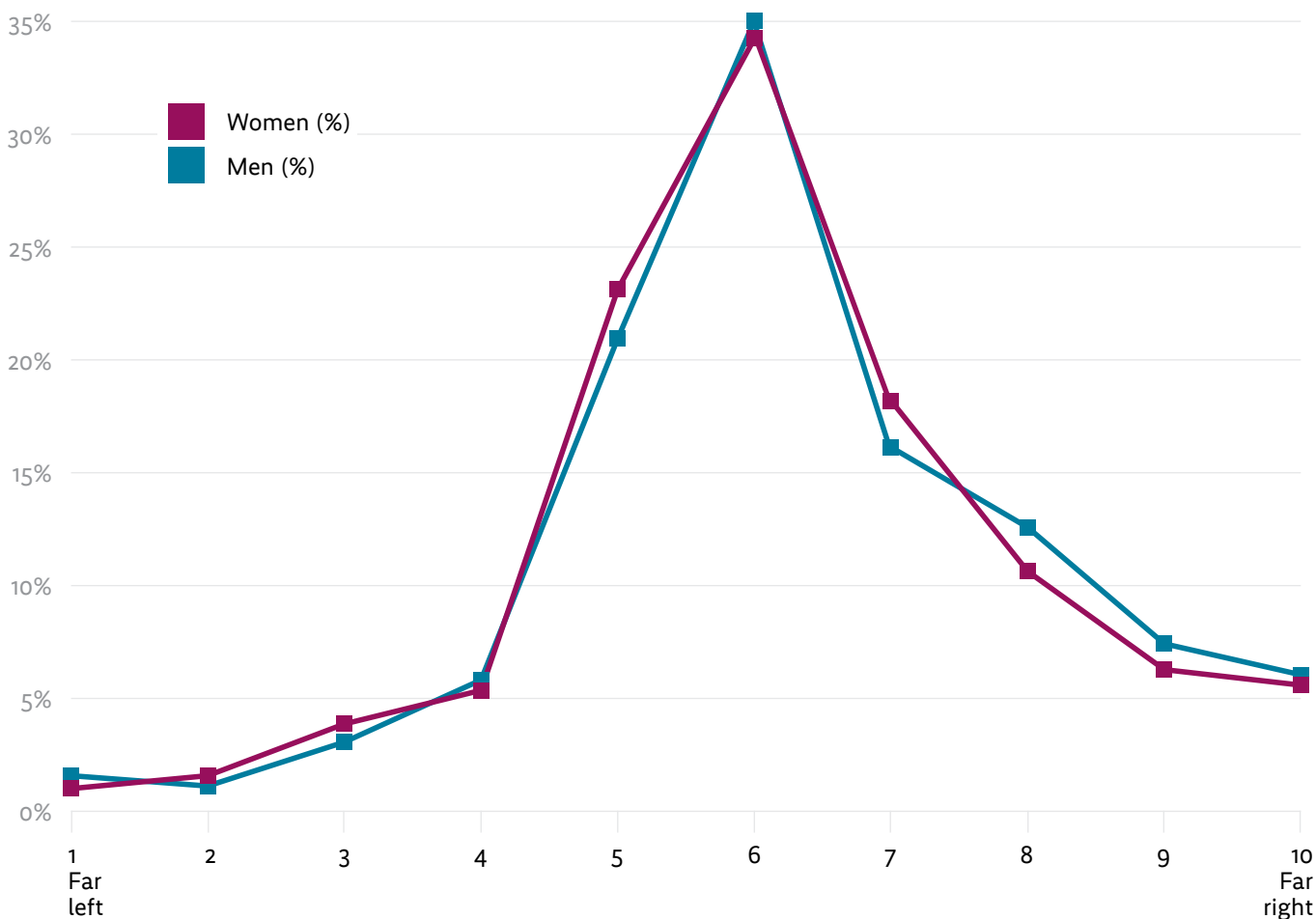
Only 11.9 per cent of young people place themselves to the left or far left (12 per cent women, 11.8 per cent men), one of the lowest percentages in the region. In contrast, 37.8 per cent identify with the right or far right (37.2 per cent women and 38.5 per cent men).

Compared with the 2019 survey, we observe that, although about half of young people in Romania continue to position themselves somewhere in the centre of the left–right axis, the proportion of those who identify with the right or far right has increased by 10 per cent. In 2019, 54 per cent of young people considered themselves centrist, 18.3 per cent left or far left, and 27.7 per cent right or far right. Also in 2019, the percentage of young males who identified themselves as left-wing was slightly higher (19.4 per cent) than young females (17.3 per cent), but insignificantly so. Today, the percentages have dropped and equalised at around 12 per cent. The percentage of young men who identify with the right or far right is still slightly higher, but the difference is insignificant.

### Left-right self-placement of young people in Romania (by gender)

Fig. 3

When it comes to politics, people talk about »left« and »right«. Generally speaking, where would you place yourself on the following scale (1 = extreme left; 10 = extreme right)?



The observed changes indicate that in Romania a transition is taking place from the traditional gender difference with regard to positioning on the left–right axis. As we have seen, women tended to be more right-oriented than men, but these days both genders are distributed in roughly equal proportions on this axis (gender non-alignment). This process took place in industrialised countries between the 1970s and 1990s, leading today to a more pronounced presence of women, especially young women, on the left of the political spectrum and a more pronounced presence of men, especially young men, on the right and far right.

At the regional level, in most of the 12 countries studied, a higher percentage of women identify themselves as left-wing than men. Some countries exhibit a significant gender difference, such as Croatia (where 25.3 per cent of young women consider themselves to be left-wing or far left compared with 16.9 per cent of young Croatian men), while in Turkey, a traditional gender difference is still observed, although the difference is relatively small (21.8 per cent of women are left-wing or far left as against 24.6 per cent of men). Also, in all the countries included in the study except Turkey, the percentage of male respondents on the right or far right is higher.

Turning to the data for Romania, by rural or urban residence, we find that young women in rural areas are slightly less likely to be on the left (10.3 per cent) than young men (13.7 per cent), while in urban areas the ratio is reversed: 13 per cent of young women and 9.5 per cent of young men are on the left. On the right-hand side of the axis, however, we observe that in rural areas young men outnumber young women (45.9 per cent versus 40.7 per cent), while in urban areas the percentages by gender are similar (35 per cent). These data do not indicate a traditional gender difference, but rather a greater polarisation among young men in rural areas compared with young women in rural areas, who are more likely to be in the centre. There are no significant differences in left–right positioning by age sub-categories and or level of education.

Secularisation is considered to be one of the factors behind the political migration of women from the right to the left in Western societies (Inglehart and Norris 2000, 2003). Religion still plays an important role in the left–right divide in Western countries, where conservative people tend to identify more with right-wing and far-right parties, and those with more liberal views tend to support left-wing or far-left parties. In Romania, there was no significant divide between political parties based on religious and conservative values after the fall of communism (Raymond 2014), as became evident in the referendum initiated by the Coalition for the Family in 2018 (Soare and Tufiş 2021). Our data show a trend of secularisation among young people. The share of those who say they go to church at least once a month is 23.8 per cent compared with 29 per cent in 2019, while the share of those who say they almost never go to church has increased from 9 to 15 per cent (gender differences are insignificant). We also note that when asked

»how important is religion in choosing a partner?«, 27.8 per cent of young people said it was important or very important, while 58.2 per cent said it was unimportant or not very important (gender differences insignificant). Given that the left–right axis in itself is not fully applicable in Romania when it comes to understanding people's political positioning, and the post-Decembrist (that is, post-1989) political parties do not differentiate between themselves in terms of religion and church, this slight trend of secularisation among young people does not seem to be sufficiently relevant to allow conclusions about its influence on the political positioning of young people of either gender. The trend at most point may indicate the potential for the development of a political force that openly embraces secularism.

### 4.3 Values associated with the left–right dimension

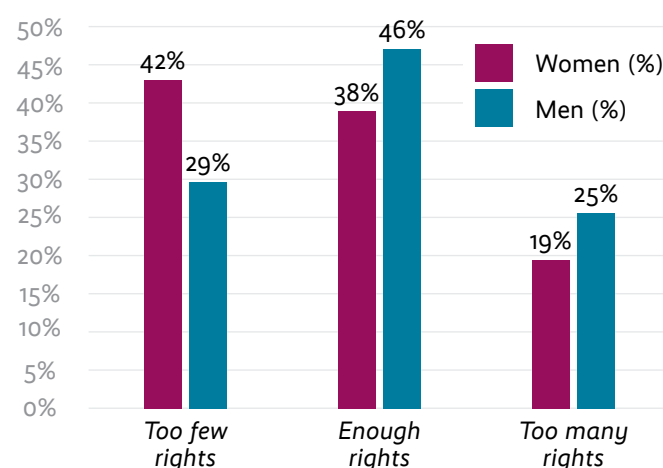
How young people position themselves on the left–right axis is not sufficient to enable us to understand their political views, as highlighted in the previous section. A more detailed analysis of the values associated with the political left and right is therefore necessary. From a gender perspective, the most significant differences are observed in the values associated with minority rights, gender equality and the role of the state in the economy. As we will see, young women tend to be more tolerant of ethnic and sexual minorities, more supportive of gender equality and more supportive of public policies aimed at reducing inequality and a more active state in the economy.

When asked whether women have too few or too many rights, the majority of young women who answered the question (42.5 per cent) believe that women in Romania do

Fig. 4

#### Women's rights

Please tell us if, in your opinion, women do not have enough rights, have enough rights or have too many rights in your country.



not have enough rights, as against 28.6 per cent of young men. A plurality of young men (45.9 per cent) believe that women in Romania have enough rights, while the percentage of young women who believe this is 38.1 per cent.

These data highlight a different perception of gender equality among young people in Romania, according to

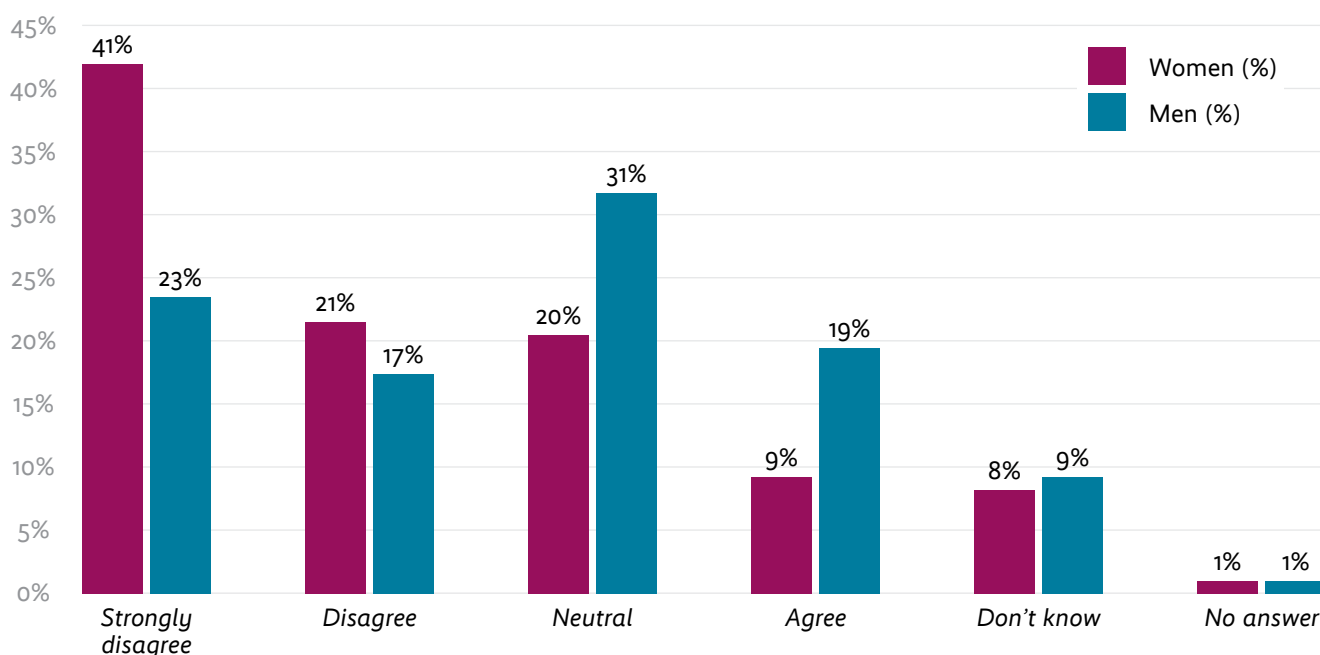
gender. Young women, based on personal experiences, show a greater awareness of gender inequality, while young men either do not find the issue to be salient to the same extent or understand the concept differently. Lack of awareness of gender inequality may also be a consequence of the fact that there is very little coverage of gender inequality in the school curriculum.

## Gender stereotypes

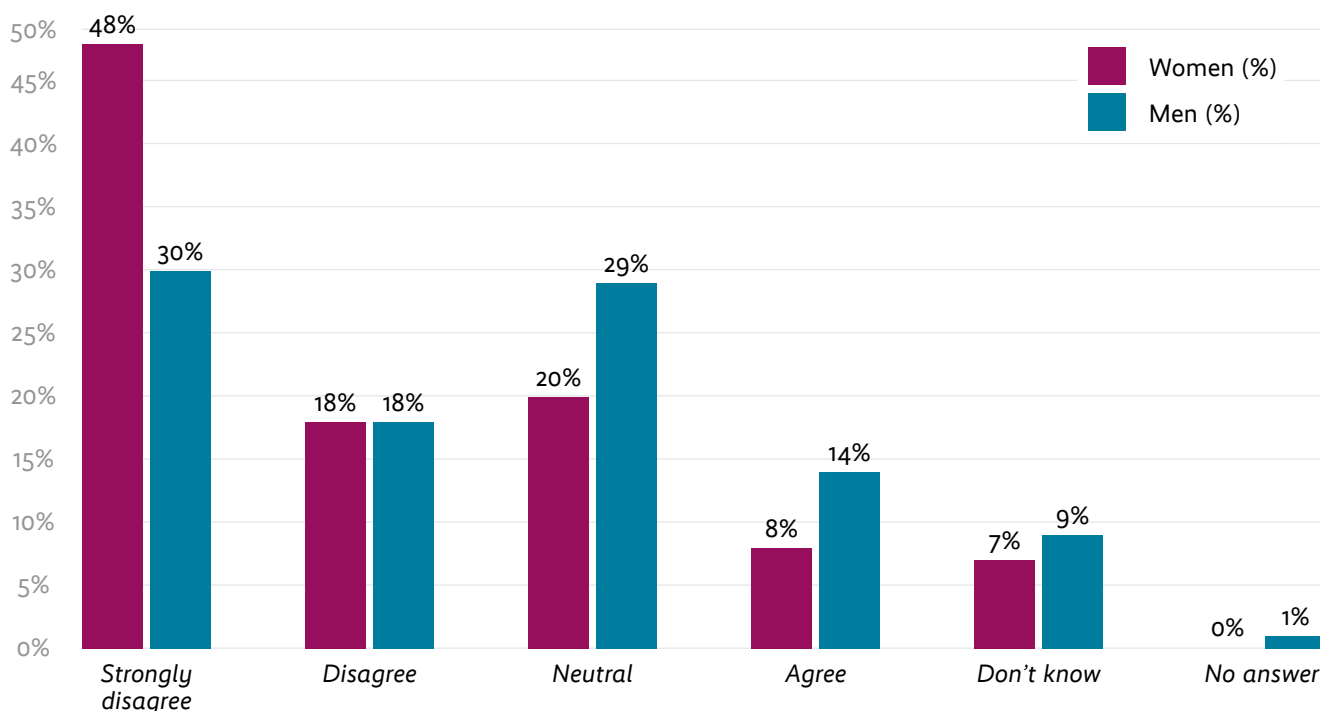
Fig. 5

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

*In general, men are better political leaders than women*

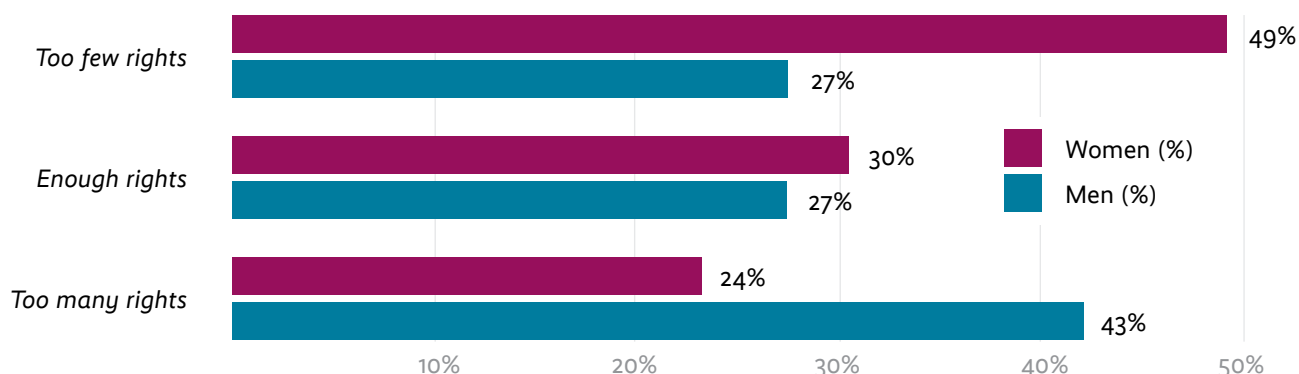


*When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women*



## LGBTQIA+ rights

Please tell us whether, in your opinion, the following groups do not have enough rights, have enough rights or have too many rights in your country: LGBTQIA+ people



These differences also hold true for gender stereotypes and prejudices such as »men are better leaders than women« or »when jobs are scarce, men are more entitled to jobs than women«.

In all 12 countries in the region we observe significant gender differences with regard to these questions. This indicates both that young women are more aware, based on their own experience, of gender discrimination and that they have a specific interest in occupying positions of power in politics and in the job market.

Gender differences are also significant in terms of perceptions of the rights of ethnic minorities and LGBTQIA+ people. Over 40 per cent of young women believe that these social groups do not enjoy sufficient rights (48.7 per cent for ethnic minorities and 42.5 per cent for LGBTQIA+), while less than a third of young men share this view (28.6 per cent for ethnic minorities and 27.4 per cent for LGBTQIA+).

On the other hand, we observe a higher degree of intolerance among men. A higher percentage of young men believe that minorities have too many rights (25.5 per cent for ethnic minorities and 42.5 per cent for LGBTQIA+). The percentages are still fairly high among young women, but substantially lower: 19.5 per cent of women believe that ethnic minorities have too many rights, and 24.4 per cent have the same perception about the LGBTQIA+ community.

A gender gap also persists when it comes to the poor: 72.5 per cent of young women, but 59.9 per cent of young men say that the poor do not have enough rights, which shows that women are more sensitive to class inequalities. Last but not least, when it comes to the rights of young people, a significantly higher percentage of young women say that young people do not have enough rights: 63.9 per cent versus 47.2 per cent of male respondents.

Gender differences in perceptions of the rights of ethnic minorities, gender equality and the rights of the poor are visible in all but a few of the 12 countries surveyed in the region. Similar to the situation in Romania, in almost all countries surveyed, except Greece and Turkey, a higher proportion of young men believe that LGBTQIA+ people have too many rights, compared with the proportion who believe that this group does not have enough. When this is coupled with the reality of the lack of legal recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights in many of these countries, it suggests a high level of homophobia in Eastern and Southern European countries, which is much more pronounced among young men than young women.

### 4.4 Supporting social and interventionist policies

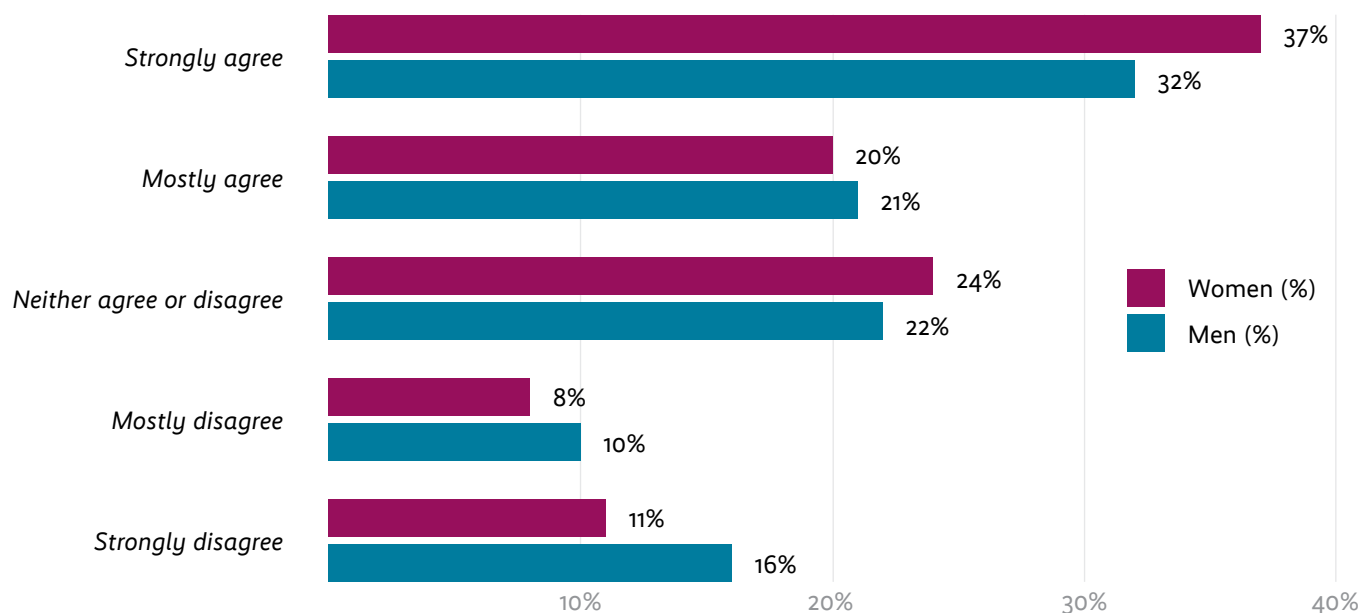
The analysis of young people's views on social inequalities and the role of the state in the economy confirms the findings of other studies, highlighting that young women in Romania are more supportive of policies to reduce economic inequality and more active state intervention in the economy.

In the survey, young people were also asked what they see as the most important problems facing Romania in the next decade. The most frequently mentioned problem was corruption, cited by 71.2 per cent of participants. This was followed by the emigration of skilled labour (56 per cent), reflecting concerns about the departure of specialists in various fields to other countries, and the quality of public services (53.1 per cent), suggesting concerns about the quality of education, health care or public administration.

Other issues raised were unemployment (42.6 per cent), inequality (38.3 per cent), climate change (35 per cent), demographic decline (29 per cent) and loss of religious and traditional values (19.9 per cent).

## Attitudes towards social inequalities

There should be more equality between the incomes of the poor and the rich.



The data analysis revealed differences between women's and men's responses. Young women tend to attach greater importance to issues such as the quality of public services (59 per cent compared with 40.9 per cent of men), climate change (39.9 per cent compared with 31.3 per cent), corruption (75 per cent compared with 67.6 per cent) and social inequality (42 per cent compared with 35 per cent). These results suggest that women are more aware of the impact of these issues on society and the future of the country. Young women in the other countries covered in the survey also tend to be more concerned about societal issues in the coming decade. There are gender differences in terms of concerns about unemployment (seen as a problem by 61 per cent of young women in the 12 countries, compared with 55.1 per cent of men), climate change (39.8 per cent of women and 32.5 per cent of men) and the quality of public services (50.9 per cent of women and 44.7 per cent of men). Young men and women in the region perceive corruption, loss of traditional and religious values and demographic decline in the same way, with slight variations in some countries.

### 4.5 The relationship between gender and support for democratic values

There is much discussion about what kind of ideological positioning contributes to the development of democracy. So far, democracy has been closely linked to liberalism, in the sense of a political regime characterised

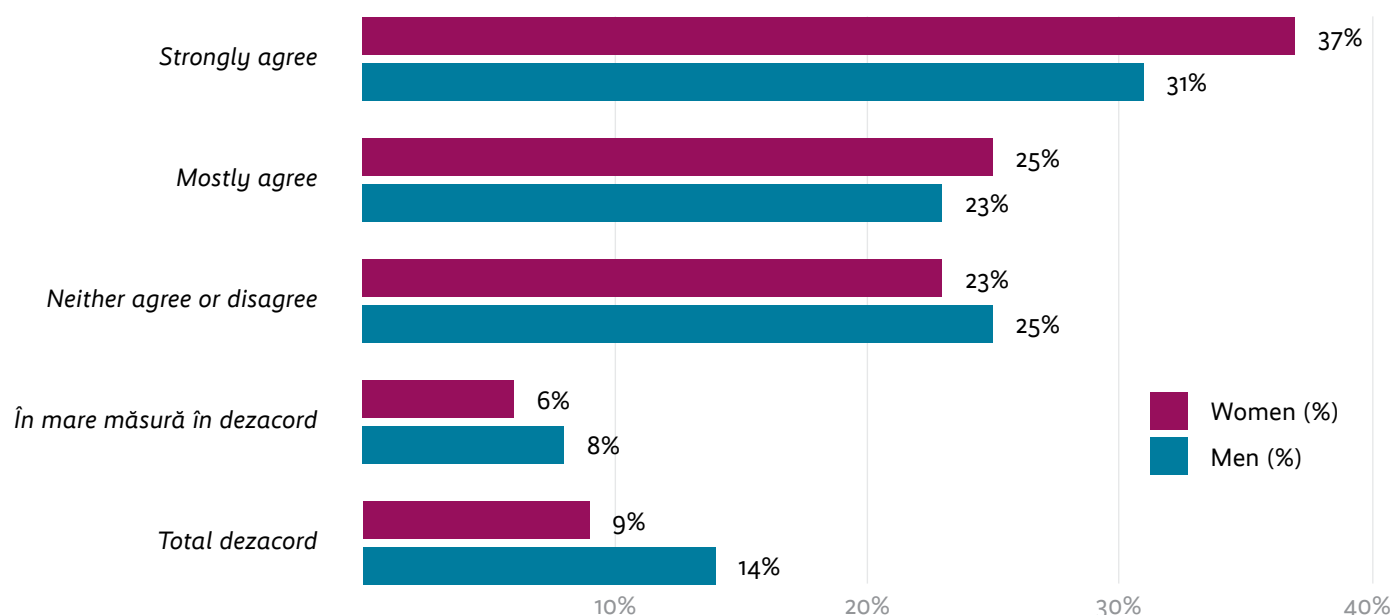
by individualism and free market principles. Liberal democracy as a binomial is often contested by many theorists (Pateman 1988; Young 1990) on the grounds that it conveys a false image of cohabitation between an ideology centred on individualism, individual freedoms and the rule of law (Mouffe 2000) and a political regime in which the institutional configurations of political decision-making work for the common good and equality among people, as citizens themselves decide what the problems of society are by voting for politicians who will then implement their expressed will (Schumpeter 2006). This relationship is often a source of political incompatibility and can jeopardise the legitimacy of institutions, leading to internal conflicts and instability. Mouffe (2000) argues that tensions and conflicts should be accepted and normalised in a democratic regime. In the current political system, however, they can become dangerous, especially for liberal democracy, which, by its very nature, may turn out to be fragile when institutions meant to guarantee the principle of equality and citizens' rights are called into question and challenged.

Women and men do not relate to democratic institutions in the same way. Hansen and Goenada (2019) argue that women are less interested in participatory institutions, political parties and the media, which perpetuate male power and privilege, preferring instead those elements of democracy that are supported by institutions designed to protect rights and promote gender equality. The authors emphasise that it is difficult to determine how respondents define democracy, when asked, and their

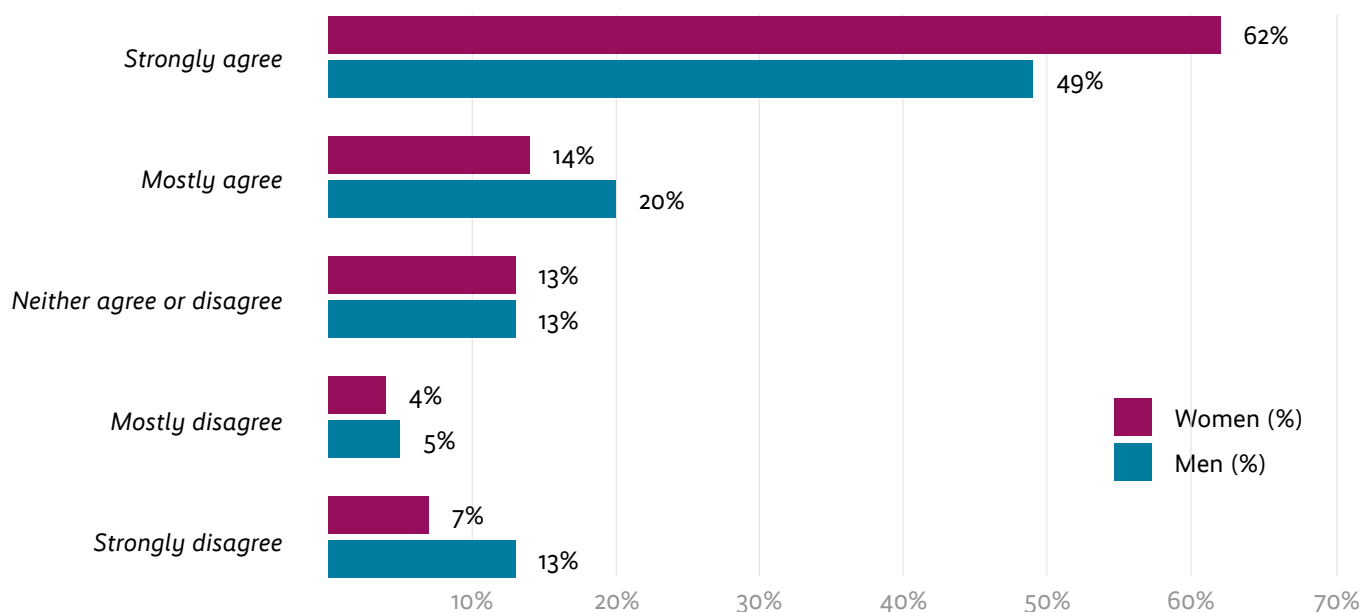


## Attitudes towards state interventionist policies in the economy

The government should play a bigger role in business and industry.



The government should take more responsibility for ensuring that everyone is provided for.

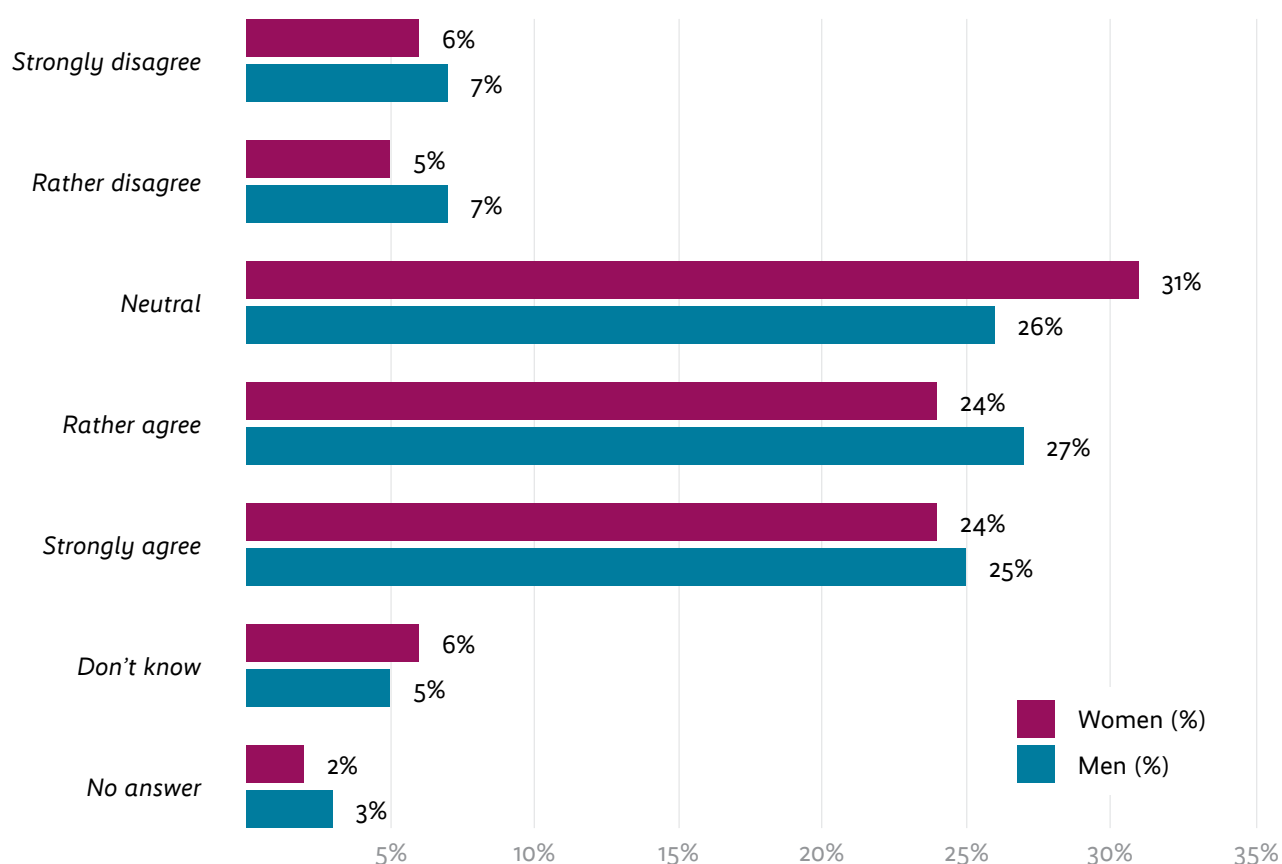


answers vary depending on structural and cultural factors. Sanders (2020) finds that gender differences tend to disappear as the democratic index increases and democracy is a functioning democracy, as citizens understand and internalise, depending on the national context, democratic principles and norms such as tolerance, social and gender justice, independence of the judiciary, rule of law, redistribution of resources and economic growth.

In Romania, most young people consider democracy to be the best form of government. Gender differences are insignificant: 51.9 per cent of men and 48.4 per cent of women agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Interestingly, 31.4 per cent of young women chose a neutral answer, avoiding a clear position.

Analysing the data by age and level of education, the survey shows that young people aged 14–18 are the

## Democracy is generally a good form of government



strongest supporters of democracy as the best form of government, at 53.1 per cent. This positive perception fluctuates among 18–24 year olds, among whom support drops to 46.5 per cent, before rising again among 25–29 year olds to 50.3 per cent. However, generational differences remain visible between the Alpha generation (born between 2010 and 2025), Generation Z (1997–2010) and, to some extent, Millennials (1981–1996).

The situation is similar in the other countries included in the survey, in particular in the four EU Member States: Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece and Slovenia. Respondents in Greece show the highest support for democracy as a form of government among the EU countries surveyed, with 60.9 per cent of men and 64 per cent of women expressing this opinion. In contrast, only 35.1 per cent of Bulgarian women consider democracy to be the best form of government, the lowest level of confidence in democracy.

In Romania, analysing the data by gender, men (51.9 per cent) are more convinced that it is the best form of government, while only 48.4 per cent of young women share this opinion. More worryingly, 31.4 per cent of

women choose a neutral answer, signalling uncertainty and possibly dissatisfaction with the way democracy and its institutions currently function.

Among non-EU countries, the lowest support for democracy is found in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially among male respondents, with 36 per cent in Serbia and 37.6 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The highest levels of support for democracy are found in Kosovo and Albania, among both men and women. In Kosovo, 76.5 per cent of women consider democracy to be the best system, the highest percentage of all the countries surveyed.

When asked to rank democratic values on a scale from very bad to very good, 36.8 per cent of young women and 45.6 per cent of young men said that democracy is »very bad« and »bad«. It is also worth noting that 35.1 per cent of women remained neutral. We observe a significant gender difference when discussing the decline of democratic values and their manifestation. We observe that young men are more pessimistic or more critical towards the application and practice of democratic values in Romania. This negative perception

*To what extent do you agree or disagree that democracy is generally a good form of government?*

		Strongly disagree	Rather disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Rather agree	Strongly agree	Don't know	No answer
<b>Albania</b>	Men (%)	2,50%	2,50%	18,50%	30,80%	39,50%	5,40%	0,70%
	Women (%)	2,5%	3,2%	15,9%	38,1%	35,8%	3,0%	1,5%
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	Men (%)	12,8%	14,0%	25,6%	29,6%	8,0%	8,4%	1,6%
	Women (%)	9,1%	8,6%	28,0%	26,7%	19,3%	7,4%	0,8%
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Men (%)	8,0%	13,3%	29,6%	21,9%	17,3%	7,5%	2,4%
	Women (%)	10,2%	12,6%	30,6%	21,9%	13,2%	9,0%	2,4%
<b>Croatia</b>	Men (%)	9,9%	7,8%	29,6%	29,9%	13,9%	8,1%	0,8%
	Women (%)	8,3%	7,7%	27,1%	32,8%	17,4%	6,6%	0,3%
<b>Kosovo</b>	Men (%)	0,0%	3,1%	18,2%	35,9%	40,6%	1,6%	0,5%
	Women (%)	0,9%	1,8%	16,6%	31,2%	45,7%	3,3%	0,6%
<b>North Macedonia</b>	Men (%)	6,1%	8,5%	27,2%	34,3%	15,0%	6,1%	2,8%
	Women (%)	2,7%	5,5%	23,4%	36,4%	18,2%	7,9%	5,8%
<b>Montenegro</b>	Men (%)	8,6%	7,4%	25,8%	31,6%	21,5%	4,7%	0,4%
	Women (%)	2,4%	6,5%	23,6%	36,2%	25,2%	4,1%	2,0%
<b>Romania</b>	Men (%)	7,2%	6,9%	26,1%	27,3%	24,6%	5,4%	2,5%
	Women (%)	6,4%	5,4%	31,4%	24,3%	24,1%	6,2%	2,2%
<b>Serbia</b>	Men (%)	15,1%	10,5%	30,1%	22,8%	13,2%	7,3%	1,1%
	Women (%)	10,9%	12,5%	27,3%	23,1%	12,7%	12,2%	1,3%
<b>Slovenia</b>	Men (%)	7,0%	13,0%	29,1%	25,3%	20,7%	3,9%	1,1%
	Women (%)	4,4%	10,4%	25,8%	30,9%	19,8%	8,7%	0,0%
<b>Greece</b>	Men (%)	4,7%	6,7%	23,7%	28,2%	32,7%	2,7%	1,2%
	Women (%)	3,7%	4,9%	22,7%	32,1%	31,9%	3,9%	0,8%
<b>Turkey</b>	Men (%)	6,3%	10,3%	16,6%	26,6%	35,2%	4,6%	0,4%
	Women (%)	4,3%	5,5%	17,3%	29,1%	38,8%	3,6%	1,4%

could reflect a frustration with how democratic institutions function or disillusionment with the promises of this political regime.

There is little difference between men and women in relation to whether they would prefer dictatorship to democracy: 43.5 per cent of young women do not consider dictatorship to be the best form of government, compared with 42.3 per cent of men. However, **while only 20 per cent of young women would choose dictatorship over democracy, among men the percentage is slightly higher, at 24.7 per cent, suggesting a stronger inclination towards authoritarian regimes.** This growing trend can also be observed over time: according to the 2019 FES survey, only 14 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women expressed a preference for authoritarian regimes five years ago. The autocratic trend is also reflected in the preference for a strong leader who disregards parliament or elections, supported by 37.7 per cent of women and 37 per cent of men. However, 62.4 per cent of women reject the idea that men are better leaders, compared with only 40 per cent of men.

Slightly more women than men (48.2 vs 45 per cent) perceive democracy as a regime that offers economic security, and this perspective correlates with their priorities: 59.1 per cent of female respondents see health and education as the most important issues for the next decade, compared with 47.6 per cent of men.

The growing authoritarian preference could be explained by the fact that women support the idea of a strong leader not so much out of ideological conviction, as out of a need for security in a context of economic and political uncertainty. At the same time, however, they reject the idea that men are better leaders, suggesting that while they prefer authority, it is not an authoritarian, traditional or masculinised version. This could indicate an openness to alternative forms of leadership, perhaps more inclusive or not reproducing existing gender hierarchies. On the other hand, male respondents who support authoritarian leaders also seem to embrace the idea that men are more appropriate leaders, which may suggest a more rigid, masculine view of power.

Young people in the other countries surveyed in the study are similar to young Romanians in terms of their willingness, under certain circumstances, to give up democracy in favour of a dictatorial regime. The percentages of men who are more likely to support this option in the EU Member States included in the study are as follows: Romania (24.7 per cent), Bulgaria (23.6 per cent) and Slovenia (26.3 per cent), while men in Greece are less likely to support an authoritarian regime (18.6 per cent).

Among the non-EU countries included in the survey, Kosovo has the highest percentage of male respondents who would accept dictatorship under certain

circumstances (28.5 per cent). Comparing this result with the level of support for democracy, it highlights the volatility of democratic regimes and democratic values, suggesting that democratic institutions are not particularly well consolidated.

The gender gap is evident. Women reject the prospect of replacing democracy with dictatorship more markedly than men. The biggest gender gaps are in Slovenia, where only 9.5 per cent of women would choose dictatorship compared with 26.3 per cent of men, in Bulgaria (13.5 per cent of women) and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where 15.2 per cent of women support this option.

At the same time, some young Romanians are willing to **give up certain freedoms in exchange for a higher standard of living**; 28.9 per cent of women and 31.8 per cent of men favour this option. Importantly, a significant proportion of women (30.4 per cent) took a neutral stance on the balance between freedoms and living standards. This suggests that young men and women tend to have a fairly pragmatic perspective on democracy with a strong economic element. They seem to feel that it needs to generate tangible benefits in order to retain legitimacy.

In theory, there is a hierarchical model of support for democracy with two levels of legitimisation:

1. *The value of democratic regimes* as manifested in people's commitment to support them. When such a commitment is lacking, a crisis of democratic legitimacy emerges, which can lead to the institutionalisation of undemocratic elements (Bădescu et al. 2019; van Beek et al. 2019). The responses analyzed suggest that democratic decline risks undermining young people's commitment to democracy and shaping how they perceive the system.
2. The legitimacy of democracy depends on the number of people who support it: in other words, *the higher the support, the more legitimate this form of government is* (Bădescu et al. 2019). Low support for democracy can result in an institutional and possibly structural transformation with different possible outcomes. Dissatisfaction with democracy can lead either to positive and necessary changes to improve democratic institutions, or, on the contrary, to a more pronounced inclination towards authoritarian forms. The survey data show a gap of approximately 15% between those who view democracy and those who view dictatorship as the best form of government, highlighting an ambivalence rooted in dissatisfaction with democracy.

Support for democracy, which is essential for legitimising democratic rule, can also be measured in terms of young men and women's views on the rule of law, state

Fig. 11

## Opinions on the state of democracy in Romania and the EU

In your opinion, how good or bad is the state of democracy in your country?

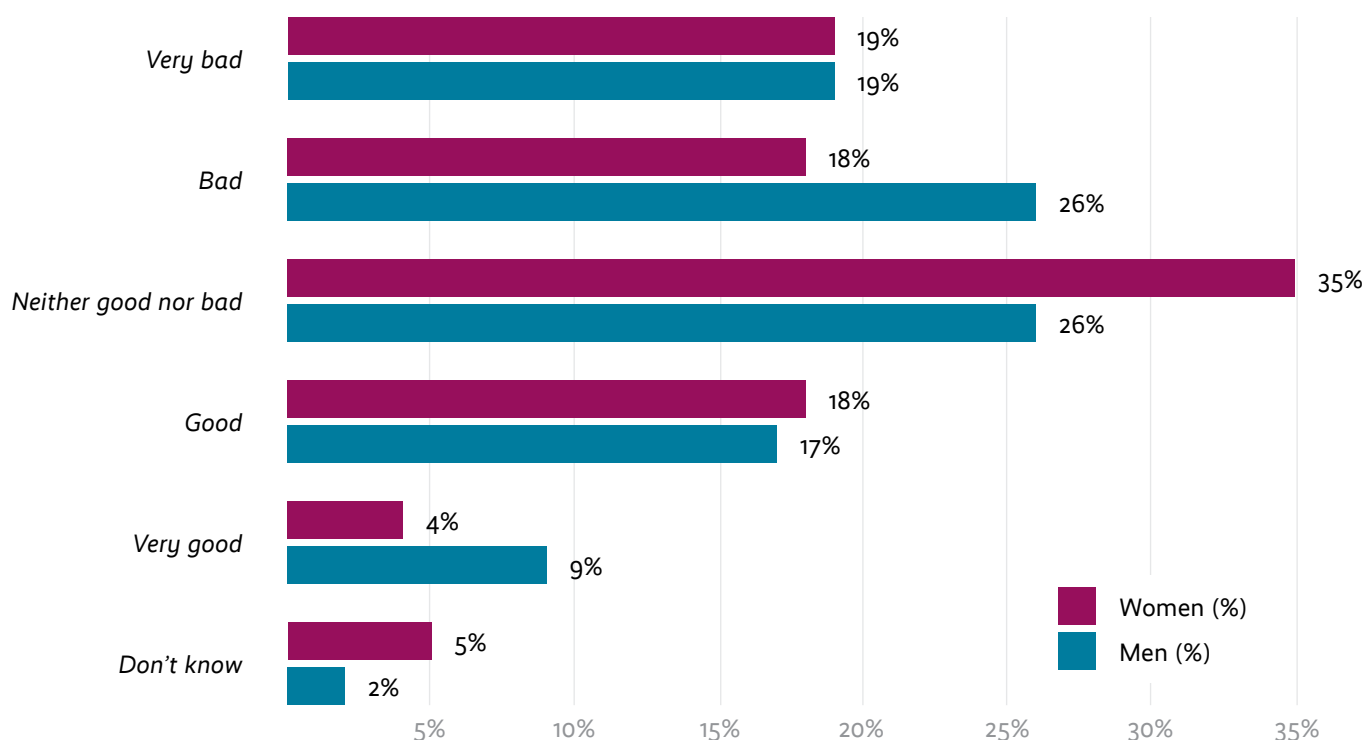
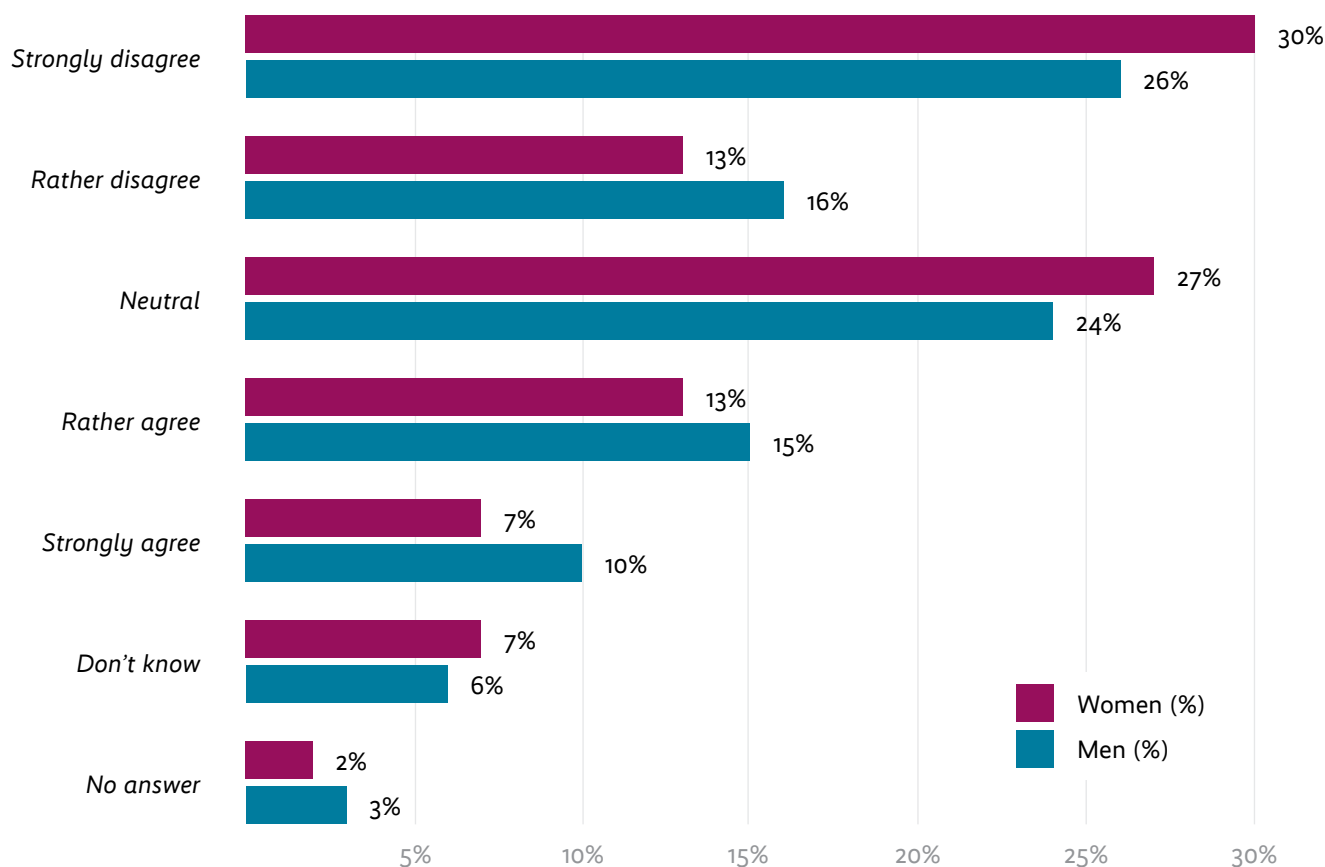


Fig. 12

## In some situations, dictatorship is a better form of government than democracy





## Trust in institutions

On the whole, how far do you trust the entities listed below?

		Deloc	Puțin	Mediu	Destul de mult	Complet
<b>President</b>	Women (%)	39,2%	17,6%	25,5%	11,2%	6,6%
	Men (%)	39,0%	18,2%	24,0%	11,5%	7,2%
<b>Parliament</b>	Women (%)	38,8%	24,40%	21,50%	11,60%	3,70%
	Men (%)	31,20%	24,20%	24,40%	14,30%	5,90%
<b>Government</b>	Women (%)	34,20%	29,80%	23,40%	9,00%	3,60%
	Men (%)	28,10%	25,00%	25,90%	14,30%	6,70%
<b>NGOs</b>	Women (%)	22,40%	21,80%	30,90%	16,60%	8,20%
	Men (%)	18,40%	19,00%	35,20%	19,30%	8,10%
<b>Political parties</b>	Women (%)	46,30%	26,00%	17,90%	7,50%	2,30%
	Men (%)	36,50%	25,70%	20,60%	11,50%	5,50%
<b>The Military</b>	Women (%)	14,50%	14,70%	27,70%	28,60%	14,50%
	Men (%)	13,50%	15,60%	25,90%	27,50%	17,40%
<b>Justice</b>	Women (%)	32,1%	19,8%	27,4%	14,6%	6,1%
	Men (%)	34,5%	20,6%	27,0%	12,3%	5,6%
<b>Trade unions</b>	Women (%)	30,70%	24,90%	28,70%	10,40%	5,20%
	Men (%)	24,50%	22,10%	31,50%	16,20%	5,70%
<b>Large companies</b>	Women (%)	18,00%	17,30%	26,10%	26,10%	12,50%
	Men (%)	17,00%	16,10%	23,30%	29,20%	14,40%
<b>European Union (EU)</b>	Women (%)	16,90%	17,10%	22,70%	28,20%	15,10%
	Men (%)	15,80%	14,50%	21,50%	27,60%	20,50%
<b>NATO</b>	Women (%)	38,8%	24,40%	21,50%	11,60%	3,70%
	Men (%)	31,20%	24,20%	24,40%	14,30%	5,90%

institutions, political parties and human rights. The 2019 FES survey shows that male and female respondents tend to criticise these fundamental elements of democracy rather than perceive them positively.

## Trust in institutions

Overall, how much do you trust the institutions listed below?

From the respondents' answers, it can be seen that women have the least trust in institutions, such as parliament and political parties: 36.4 per cent of women say that they do not trust these institutions at all. In contrast, the most trusted institution is the judiciary, in which 73 per cent of respondents express trust, ranging from a little to complete trust. A similar trend is also found among male respondents, who generally trust institutions more than women. The judiciary also ranks first when it comes to level of trust among young men, at 78.1 per cent, while political parties and the national parliament rank last, at 58.3 per cent and 64.7 per cent, respectively. In terms of local government, responses are similar by gender, as around 72 per cent of both young men and women report a positive opinion. NGOs are also more trusted, with 70.4 per cent of women and 74.4 per cent of men trusting them. As for the media, trust stands at 60.6 per cent among women and 68.6 per cent among men.

In general, women are found to have lower levels of trust than men, with significant differences. One possible explanation could be that young women feel a greater distance from male-dominated democratic institutions, which do not sufficiently represent their interests and views. These institutions do not really address gender issues and do not prioritise topics relevant to women. It should also be noted how women are often portrayed in a sexist or denigrating manner, and sensitive topics, such as domestic violence, rape or sexual harassment, are trivialised or turned into subjects for entertainment.<sup>9</sup>

Autocratic tendencies and democratic decline may also be explained in terms of human rights, namely the rights of women, ethnic groups, sexual minorities, the poor and immigrants. As noted in the previous section, there is a significant gender divide in opinions on these topics. Women compared with men are more likely to agree that these groups do not have enough rights. As far as national identity is concerned, 41.5 per cent of the men surveyed believe that immigrants living in Romania should adopt national customs and values, while 35.4 per cent of women are slightly more open on this

point. Furthermore, 33.2 per cent of male respondents perceive Romanian identity as hereditary, stating that »a Romanian is a person who has Romanian blood«. In contrast, only 21.4 per cent of women share this view. Also, 38.9 per cent of men believe that Romanian culture should be protected from external influences, compared with 33.6 per cent of women. These data suggest a greater fear of change among men, especially in a global context marked by increasingly visible migration flows.

<sup>9</sup> See also IJC report »In the shadow of stereotypes: from mother to vampire. Women's representation in the Romanian press in 2024«; available at: [https://cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Research-report\\_Ro.pdf](https://cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Research-report_Ro.pdf).

## 5.

# Conclusions and recommendations

The data analysed here show that in Romania there are sometimes significant differences between young women and young men (14–29 age group) in terms of political participation and support for democratic values. Our country is not exceptional in this respect, as these differences are also found, more or less, in the other Southern and Eastern European countries included in the sample from which we have extracted the data.

Gender differences at the level of young people's perceptions of democratic values and political institutions not only highlight differences of opinion, but also a deep-rooted gender socialisation that shapes how they relate to political power and social rights. The majority of young people in Romania assert that democracy is the best form of government; gender differences are insignificant in this respect. By contrast, the percentage of young men who would support dictatorship in certain circumstances is slightly higher than that of young women (24.7 per cent compared with 20 per cent), indicating gender differences in young people's inclination towards authoritarianism.

Women have a much lower level of trust in political institutions, especially political parties and parliaments, than men. This can be explained partly by women's history of exclusion from the public sphere and the underrepresentation of their interests in power structures. Women, on the other hand, have a much more favourable perception of NGOs, seeing them as more sensitive to social needs and more responsive to the problems women face.

There is a significant difference among young people in perceptions of gender inequality and respect for minority rights. Young women are definitely more open to the rights of ethnic minorities, LGBTQAI+ and poor people and perceive gender discrimination at societal level to a greater extent. But men tend to believe that minority groups and women already enjoy adequate, sometimes even excessive, rights. This contrast suggests a lack of awareness of the systematic problems faced by these groups. Note that our analysis has shown that the level of homophobia is very high among young people in Romania and the region, but is more pronounced among young men.

Men tend to be more satisfied with the status quo and are more likely to perceive existing rights as sufficient or even excessive. In contrast, women are more critical, believing that inequalities and injustices persist. This difference

suggests a different social experience by gender; women experience inequity and exclusion more directly. But it may also be an effect of upbringing and socialisation, which favour men's privileged experience and underestimate the realities of women and other marginalised groups.

Analysis of the data shows that young women, especially those from rural areas and from families with, at best, average levels of education, have less interest in and less knowledge of politics. Almost a third of them do not know – or would not want to say – where they position themselves on the left–right axis, and those who did so opted mainly for centrist positions. This confirms that the traditional left–right division for identifying shared political values is insufficiently understood and thus applicable among young people in Romania. When it comes to the percentages of those who opted to position themselves either on the left or on the right, however, the analysis shows insignificant gender differences. This marks a change from the previous FES survey, according to which women tended to be more right-wing than men. We also note a greater political polarisation among young rural males, who are less likely to position themselves at the centre of the political spectrum and more towards the margins, especially the right. In fact, a general conclusion from the study with regard to both young men and women is that the percentage of those who self-position themselves to the right has increased compared with 2019.

Leaving aside the discussion of young Romanians' understanding of the left and the right on the political spectrum, we have observed that they largely support social and interventionist state policies, and young women significantly more so. The data show a greater concern among women for social and economic equality, as well as greater support for state intervention to reduce inequalities between rich and poor. This trend can be interpreted in terms of women's specific experiences. They are often more exposed to economic and social vulnerabilities and therefore more willing to support stronger government protection and support measures. In the same vein, we have found that they attach greater importance to issues such as the quality of public services, climate change, corruption and social inequality.

On the basis of these conclusions, our final recommendations are to improve young people's civic and political education throughout their time in full-time education so that they may better understand democratic

values, the importance of political participation, gender equality and minority rights. If young women are to feel better represented politically and gain confidence that their voices are being heard, it is essential that the presence of women in decision-making positions, especially young women, be increased. More democratic representation means that decision-making bodies should also reflect diversity on the basis of ethnicity, place of residence, sexual orientation and so on. Given that our analysis shows that young men are not sufficiently aware of gender inequalities, it is important that relevant information be integrated into the school curriculum to raise their awareness of these issues. Last but not least, political actors should heed the increasing support for authoritarianism and decreasing trust in democracy and take action to combat them.

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## Young people in Romania

The study shows that in Romania there are significant differences between young men and young women (aged 14–29) with regard to political participation and support for democratic values. Young women have less trust in political institutions and a more favourable attitude towards NGOs, which they perceive as more responsive to social issues. They are also more supportive of minority rights and more clearly recognise gender discrimination, while young men often feel that the rights of vulnerable groups are already sufficient or even excessive.

The majority of young people in Romania say that democracy is the best form of government, but the percentage of young men who would support dictatorship is slightly higher than that of young women. The level of homophobia is also higher among men, and young men in rural areas are more politically polarised and position themselves further to the right of the political spectrum.

Women show less interest in politics, especially those from rural areas or with lower levels of education. However, young women are more supportive of social policies and state intervention to reduce inequality, and are more concerned about issues such as climate change, corruption and the quality of public services.