

**THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND GENERATION Z.  
UNDERSTANDING YOUNG CITIZENS' PERCEPTION ON  
REFUGEES**

<b>Abstract:</b>	<i>In the last decades the issue of refugees and immigrants has become more transparent and a subject of interest for the common citizen. Many authors discuss and analyze how people perceive immigration and the issues related to them. However, we know very little about what young citizens, members of generation Z, think about refugees and immigrants. The paper addresses this gap in the literature and analyzes how young citizens perceive immigrants and refugees that arrive in Romania. It uses Romania as a single-case study and semi-structured interviews conducted in September 2022-October 2022 with young citizens coming from different socio-demographic profiles, to explain the variation in how they perceive the recent Ukrainian refugees and other immigrants. The main purpose is to explain the perceptions variation related to the current crisis generated by Russian Federation. The findings indicate that young citizens' perceptions are influenced by a combination of general attitudes toward the political system and society, education, and specific attitudes about potential external threats.</i>
<b>Keywords:</b>	Generation Z; Ukraine; Refugees; Perceptions
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**Introduction**

Each generation has its share of experiences and events that can help outline a vision of the main characteristics that define it. Today, Generation Z is the one that is preparing to take up positions in government institutions and private

companies, thus being the generation that will shape our future. In this context, the way they relate to certain events is relevant to understand the way the future society will function.

The present article aims to understand the perception of Generation Z in Romania regarding the Ukrainian refugees who arrived in the country because of the armed conflict that began in February 2022. In this research, we offer an empirical contribution to understating young people's perception on Ukrainian refugees in these geopolitical situations. The investigation departs from the following research question: What is the perception of members of Generation Z (from Romania) on the issue of Ukrainian refugees?

Perception is a relatively abstract construct that can be measured by various methods. In the present case, the young people's perception of the refugee problem is built on several indicators: their visions regarding the effects that refugees produce at the level of community security and at the level of individual security, respectively their ideas regarding the role that the state and the individual have in the management of this situation.

These elements are investigated using the semi-structured interview method applied to a number of 20 young people who are part of Generation Z and study in different fields. The conflict in Ukraine started in February 2022 and since then many Ukrainian refugees arrived in Romania offering us a good moment to test the attitudes of members of our younger generation.

The article starts with the establishment of the theoretical framework in which the idea of perception is conceptualized, the main characteristics of generation Z are presented and the role that age plays in shaping perception about refugees. The research continues with the presentation of our research design and, finally, with a section dedicated to a discussion based on the results.

## **Theoretical framework**

### *Perception and refugees*

As a social construct, perception is defined as the primary form through which the individual achieves cognitive contact with the world. Perception makes a connection with the environment and its constituents, and it represents a manifestation of the way one sees the world. In the international relations environment, public perception is associated with the transposition of international events into the behaviors within societies.

Empirical studies conducted to compare distinct cultures have demonstrated that people are surprisingly different in projecting perceptions towards themselves and others. This fact demonstrates both the social dynamics and the particular way in which people perceive certain subjects. People's ability to subjectively interpret the social world and its mechanisms are influenced by values, needs and expectations, **age**, and educational background.

According to UNHCR, refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as: „someone

who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”<sup>1</sup>. Refugees are the people fleeing their homeland owing to serious human rights violations and seeking safe harbors by crossing their borders<sup>2</sup>. The collapse in the civil order of the neighboring countries has resulted in tremendous population displacement in the last few decades. For our study, we will use the case of Ukrainians who are seeking shelter in Romania because of the Russian invasion.

Previous studies have shown that attitudes towards immigrants and asylum seekers, as well as thoughts about their deservingness, depend on what they think about their characteristics, such as race, background or religion, and age<sup>3,4</sup>. Researchers discussed various deservingness criteria in relation to groups that shape perceptions about refugees. Van Oorschot in his paper „Individual Motives for Contributing to Welfare Benefits in the Netherlands” lists five criteria: control (people who are not responsible for their situation are more deserving), level of need (people in greater need are seen as more deserving), group identity (groups whose identities are closer to our own are seen as more deserving), group attitudes (people who are more likable and grateful are seen as more deserving) and reciprocity (individuals and groups who have made contributions to the in-group or may be expected to contribute in the future are viewed as more deserving)<sup>5</sup>. These criteria contribute to the way perceptions of refugees are constructed and shared. Based on this, people can perceive refugees as a threat or as an opportunity. These perceptions are influenced by educational background, previous experiences, and, of course, age.

#### *Generation Z – who are they?*

Born and raised between 1995 and 2010, Generation Z, like other generations, comes with a unique set of features. Like any other generation, the main characteristics that define them are the result of the economic and social context, cultural events and more important, technological evolutions. Generation Z is the first generation to grow up with access to internet, screens and mobile technology. This context has a strong effect in their personalities, way of thinking and behaviors. Because they are surrounded by laptops, smart phones and have

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<sup>1</sup> *What is a refugee?* <https://www.unhcr.org/what-is-a-refugee.html>, (10.11.2022)

<sup>2</sup> J. Allen, B.V. Aina, E. Hauff, *Refugees and asylum seekers in societies*, in L. S. David, J. W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 201

<sup>3</sup> J. Hainmuller, M.J. Hiscox, *Attitudes Toward Highly Skilled and Lowskilled Immigration: Evidence from a Survey Experiment*, in "American Political Science Review", Vol. 104, No. 1, 2010, p.73

<sup>4</sup> K. Bansak, J. Hainmuller, D. Hangartner, *How Economic, humanitarian, and Religious Concerns Shape European Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers*, in "Science" Vol. 354, No. 6309, 2016, p.218.

<sup>5</sup>W. Van Oorschot, *Individual Motives for Contributing to Welfare Benefits in the Netherlands*, in "Policy & Politics", Vol. 30, No. 1, 2000, p.35

access to web, networks, and digital media they are often called iGeneration, Gen Tech, Online Generation, Facebook Generation<sup>1</sup>, Switchers, „always clicking”<sup>2</sup>. Today, Generation Z represents 30% of the world’s population (2 billion) and is considered the largest generation ever<sup>3</sup>.

Generation Z are true "digital natives" that managed to integrate technology into their lives. Being able to use any type of smartphone or tablet and navigate the internet enables them to easily access information and communicate. Communication and access to information makes them global citizens.

Members of Generation Z may describe themselves as motivated, determined, open-minded, caring, a diverse generation grounded in a sense of integrity and tenacity. They value financial security, family and relationships, meaningful work, and happiness, and are motivated through relationships, engaging with their passions, and achievement<sup>4</sup>. They grew up in a safer, more prosperous, more peaceful world and that made them freer and bolder, more willing to take risks and change, more volatile. They are on-the-go moving homes, jobs and careers faster than ever before<sup>5</sup>.

Even though they are considered to be the most educated generation<sup>6</sup>, for them, education means imitation and their library is YouTube, and Instagram. They also believe that online gives them the resources they need to learn and question the traditional education system<sup>7</sup>. The Covid -19 pandemic and its lockdowns kept them away from traditional education. They were able to quickly adapt and to continue their education even though they were away from the classrooms.

Radically different than Millennials, this generation has an entirely unique perspective on careers, success, and life in the workforce<sup>8</sup>. They are known to be pragmatic, and they are looking for companies that can demonstrate not only their

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<sup>1</sup> Raluca Luțai, *Generation Z: characteristics, social networks and political behavior*, in "Anuarul Institutului de Istorie G. Baritiu", 2020, p.4

<sup>2</sup> Anna Dolot, *New Trends in Management The Characteristics of Generation Z*, in "E-Mentor", No. 2, 2018, pp. 44–50

<sup>3</sup> *Gen Z and Gen Alpha Infographic Update*, <https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/generation-z/gen-z-and-gen-alpha-infographic-update/>, (11.11.2022)

<sup>4</sup> Meghan Grace, Seemiller Corey, *Generation Z - a Century in the Making*, Vol. 53, 2019

<sup>5</sup> *Gen Z and Gen Alpha Infographic Update*, <https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/generation-z/gen-z-and-gen-alpha-infographic-update/>, (11.11.2022)

<sup>6</sup> Regina Pefanis Schlee, Vicki Blakney Eveland, Katrin R. Harich, *From Millennials to Gen Z: Changes in Student Attitudes about Group Projects*, in "Journal of Education for Business", 2019

<sup>7</sup> Raluca Luțai, *Op.cit.*, p.6

<sup>8</sup> *Understanding Generation Z in the workplace*, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/consumer-business/articles/understanding-generation-z-in-the-workplace.html>, (11.11.2022)

capacity to pay them good salaries but also their commitment to a broader set of societal challenges such as sustainability, climate change, and hunger. They are creative and believe in transforming good ideas into a profitable business. They enjoy working with digital tools, appreciate technological skills, and request management skills.

From a social perspective, as soon as they were old enough to click, those in Generation Z have had news at their fingertips about every global and local crisis, giving this generation much to worry about even at a young age. This has led them to care deeply about many issues, especially those they believe have a significant current and future impact on society. They care about the environment, equality, gun control and they accept diversity as a form of expression<sup>1</sup>. They've grown up in a diverse world and it's all they know. They are the most likely generation to see the advancement of LGBTQ rights as a positive development, they are losing their religion, they are more likely to identify as atheist or agnostic and most think church attendance is unimportant<sup>2</sup>. As for those in charge of solving the main problems, members of Gen Z are more likely than older generations to look to the government to solve problems, rather than businesses and individuals<sup>3</sup>.

With these new characteristic's generation, Z members will be the leaders and doers of tomorrow. The way they were born and the values which they believe will shape society.

#### *Age and the perception of refugees*

Youth perceptions are not always in step with those of older societal cohorts. Adorno noted in the 1950s, "today we are faced with a generation purporting to be young, yet in all its reactions insufferably more grown-up than its parents ever were"<sup>4</sup>. Findings from the European Social Survey suggested that public attitudes toward immigration are closely linked to people's educational backgrounds<sup>5</sup> and that young people show more favorable attitudes toward immigrants than older and lesser-educated people do.

In 2016, International Civic and Citizenship Study measured among other things, young citizens' attitudes toward migrants and refugees. Their result shows that between 81% and 95% of young students believe that their countries should cooperate and should provide shelter to refugees<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Raluca Luțai, *Op.cit.*, p.7

<sup>2</sup> *Gen Z is the least religious generation. here's why that could be a good thing.* [https://psmag.com/ideas/gen-z-is-the-least-religious-generation-heres-why-that-could-be-a-good-thing\\_](https://psmag.com/ideas/gen-z-is-the-least-religious-generation-heres-why-that-could-be-a-good-thing_) (11.11.2022)

<sup>3</sup> *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far* <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/> (11.11.2022)

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Dobson, Gabriella Agrusti, Marta Pinto, *Supporting the inclusion of refugees: policies, theories and actions*, in "International Journal of Inclusive Education", 2019, p. 8

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Losito, Gabriella Argusti, Valeria Damiani, Wolfram Schulz, *Young People's Perceptions of Europe in a Time of Change*, ICCS 2016, p.15

These results have an explanation for the way young citizens interact online. They have access to social media, are digitally informed, and get empowered faster than other age categories. They accept refugees and immigrants and get involved in various actions meant to help them due to their high level of enthusiasm and because of their economical comfort. Rightly mobilized online members of Generation Z will get socially involved in issues like immigrants or refugees.

## Methods

From a methodological perspective, our study is constructed using the semi-structured interview method as the primary data collection method. To find out how young citizens perceive Ukrainian refugees, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews in September – October 2022. Romania was selected as a single case study. We decided to analyze the case of Romania because of its geographical proximity to Ukraine. Romania was, on the eve of the conflict, a place of refuge for Ukrainian citizens who managed to escape the conflict. Almost 1.2 million Ukrainians have crossed the border into Romania since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and 7% of them have remained in the country<sup>1</sup>. The statistics record that in Romania are about 81.000 Ukrainians refugees. This provides a good framework for analyzing the perception that citizens have toward them.

In Romania, generation Z represents 2.881.345 of the totals of Romania's population<sup>2</sup>. They represent the first generation that did not experience any authoritarian system or restriction of rights in Romania. They are also the ones who become adults in the most prosperous period in the history of Romania. Apart from the Covid 19 pandemic and the recent conflict situation, members of Generation Z have been part of a free, safe, and prosperous world, which is why studies characterize them as financially optimistic<sup>3</sup>. From a political and management perspective, the members of Generation Z are the ones who will take over the leadership of public and private organizations and who will become the leaders of Romanian society. For these reasons, it is important to understand their perception of certain events that mark their development. Their reporting of a certain situation can be an indicator of the way in which the society of the future is built.

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<sup>1</sup>1,2 milioane de ucrainieni au trecut granita in Romania, [https://www.zf.ro/eveniment/aproape-1-2-milioane-ucraineni-au-trecut-granita-romania-inceputul-20931415\\_](https://www.zf.ro/eveniment/aproape-1-2-milioane-ucraineni-au-trecut-granita-romania-inceputul-20931415_) (09.11.2022)

<sup>2</sup> Romania generatiilor, <https://panorama.ro/romania-generatiilor-puterea-demografica-politica-si-economica-a-fiecarei-categorii-de-varsta-din-populatia-tarii/>, (09.11.2022)

<sup>3</sup> Generația Z din România este optimistă. 13% dintre tinerii români până în 25 de ani au deja o ipotecă, [https://www.profit.ro/stiri/social/grafice-generatia-z-din-romania-este-optimista-13-dintre-tinerii-romani-pana-in-25-de-ani-au-deja-o-ipoteca-19071202\\_](https://www.profit.ro/stiri/social/grafice-generatia-z-din-romania-este-optimista-13-dintre-tinerii-romani-pana-in-25-de-ani-au-deja-o-ipoteca-19071202_) (09.11.2022)

We used the method of semi-structured interviews because the respondent's point-of-view is the most salient concern for qualitative researchers as this lets the researcher understand the phenomena they have encountered. Because of their flexibility, semi-structured interviews are more appropriate in our case.

The interviews we conducted had ten questions through which we tried to find out, in-depth, what is the youth's point of view on matters related to Ukrainian refugees. We considered that this method offers us the opportunity to understand the complexity of opinions and views related to this topic. In terms of content, the interview started with questions aimed to understand if young citizens are interested in the events taking place in our country and in the world and their main sources of information. After that, questions were related to the amount of information they have about the war in Ukraine and their level of concern about the state of the Ukrainian refugees. To test their perception, we asked them about the way they see the effect of Ukrainian refugees both at a personal level and at the community level and we ended the interview with a discussion about the obligation Romanian citizens and governmental institutions have towards the Ukrainian refugees. (Appendix 1 presents the complete interview guide).

Our interview was applied to members of the general population with variation on age, sex, and region. Participants were persons who are born between 1995 – 2000, members of the generation we are analyzing. The profile of our respondents is diverse. We interacted with young people (age: 18- 22) that come from several parts of Romania (Cluj, Alba, Bistrita, Piatra Neamt, Oradea) who are students in various fields (Appendix 2 provides an overview of the participants). The data collected represents the views of females and males, with rates of 45% and 55% respectively. The interviews were applied by phone but also face to face.

The analysis of the data will be guided by an inductive approach. This requires understanding participants views and experiences in the specific context of our study. As thematic analysis involves the implementation of codes and themes within the data. Table 1 presents three major themes identified in our interviews.

<b>Major themes</b>	<b>Codes/subthemes</b>	<b>Quotes</b>
Gen Z are informed about the situation in Ukraine	Interest	„Of course, I am carefully watching what is going on in Ukraine. The situation is happening right at our door.” (I8)
Gen Z perception on the Ukrainian refugees' impact on communities	Positive impact	„I believe that the effect of the Ukrainian refugees had a positive impact on the Romanian community as it brought back the need to show empathy and the solidarity to get involved in

		humanitarian cases. We needed this.” (I19)
	Negative impact	„The refugees draw Russia's attention to Romania, and this may intensify already existing conflicts.” (I3)
Gen Z and their safety near Ukrainians	No general concerns	„They are here because the war made them leave their homes. They don't want anything from us except our help and support. I don't see them creating problems or endangering us. We share the same values and I believe we have the same allies and enemies.” (I12)
Gen Z opinion about governmental action	The government should act	„Stat institutions have a duty towards Ukrainians. They must help them overcome this situation” (I7)
	The government should invest in its own citizens	„We have so many problems that need to be addressed by our state, like the state of our hospitals, the issue of our homeless people. We need to make steps towards this after that we can see how we can support the refugees.”

**Table 1. Major themes**

### **Findings and discussion**

The level of information that the young members of Generation Z have regarding the conflict situation in Ukraine is an indicator of the interest they have in the situation. As we anticipated, and as is specific to members of Generation Z, our respondents are informed about the evolution of the conflict. The reasons they cite are related to geographical proximity: "Of course, I am carefully watching what is going on in Ukraine. The situation is happening right at our door." (I8) but also the uniqueness of the event: "I didn't think that in the times we live in we can witness a war. I only learned about wars in history, so it's interesting to follow one"(I2).

When asked what the main source of information they use, the respondents of our interview stated that they most often access online mass media, electronic



versions of traditional mass media. In parallel with this, many of them declare that much of the information they have about the war in Ukraine comes from their News Feed on Facebook or Tik Tok. One of the respondents stated: "I often use Tik Tok. In the first days of the war, I saw the opportunity to find out what was happening directly there. There were many videos that helped me formulate my opinion"(I13). Other respondents also mentioned various online discussion groups. The answers received show us that Generation Z is truly digital. They confirm other studies and statistics carried out at the regional or global level<sup>1</sup>.

The first element that builds the perception of members of Generation Z regarding Ukrainian refugees is related to the way they are perceived in the communities where they arrive. The respondents of our interview are divided into two categories: those who see the presence of Ukrainian refugees in Romania as a positive element and those who see it negatively.

The positive perspective is outlined by economic, security, cultural, and solidarity-related arguments. The young members of Generation Z believe that the presence of Ukrainian refugees is a useful element for the economy of the communities. Some respondents believe that among the refugees there are also businessmen who will create opportunities for the communities where they arrive, while "as far as I know, Ukrainian businessmen managed to reach Romania. They can open their businesses here, thus offering jobs"(I20), others, believe that Ukrainian refugees can be employed in the labor market that suffers by a lack of personnel: "they can work in places where labor is needed".(I2)

In parallel with the economic elements, members of Generation Z consider that the presence of Ukrainian refugees in the communities they belong to enriches them culturally. For them, the interaction with the Ukrainian population is a good moment to better understand their situation and to learn more about their culture: "I think it's a good opportunity to get to know them and learn more about their culture". (I3)

Many of the members of Generation Z also brought up aspects related to high levels of security. They believe that Romania's reputation is growing and that the demonstration of solidarity that the Romanian state is making now will bring a strong partnership with Ukraine at the end of the conflict: "Ukraine will appreciate the support that Romania offers and the northern area will be safer. Collaboration will increase at the end of the conflict". (I7)

Besides these aspects, the respondents brought up an interesting element. Some of them are of the opinion that the presence of refugees rekindles a sense of solidarity. "I believe that the effect of the Ukrainian refugees had a positive impact on the Romanian community as it brought back the need to show empathy and solidarity to get involved in humanitarian cases. We needed this". (I16)

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<sup>1</sup>*Mind the gap,*

<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/email/genz/2022/07/05/2022-07-05b.html>,  
(09.11.2022)

Although there are many who welcome the presence of Ukrainians, among our respondents there were several voices who also emphasized the negative impact that refugees can have on the communities they belong to. They believe that Ukrainian refugees do not bring economic prosperity, but on the contrary, they will take over the jobs of Romanian citizens. Moreover, Romania's security will not be increased. The respondents who are of this opinion argue that the support that Romania offers to Ukraine attracts the attention of the Russian Federation "The refugees draw Russia's attention to Romania and this may intensify already existing conflicts". (I4) the invocation of the geopolitical situation is specific to the respondents who come from science fields and do not have the most developed understanding of the topic of relations between the two states.

In parallel with these visions, there was also a certain nationalist attitude in which the refugees are seen as a burden for Romania: Why should we give them money, when we have children in the country who are dying of hunger? (I2). Attitudes like this are somewhat normal. What is encouraging is that those who debate the negative elements are far fewer than those who see the glass half full.

As a preliminary conclusion, we can say that Romania's generation Z confirms the defining characteristics of the generation: they are socially active, tolerant, and embrace diversity.

The second element that we tested and which contributes to understanding the perception of Generation Z, is the relationship between refugees and individual security. All 20 respondents stated that they do not feel in any way threatened by the presence of refugees: "They are here because the war made them leave their homes. They don't want anything from us except our help and support. I don't see them creating problems or endangering us. We share the same values and I believe we have the same allies and enemies".(I1) This tests the theory we know about them: they are open to otherness and easily accept people belonging to another culture that they do not consider under any form of threat.

The last component that helps us build the perception that generation Z has towards refugees from Ukraine is related to the way they perceive their role and that of government institutions in managing the refugee situation. As in the case of the question related to the impact on the communities, the opinions are divided: most of them consider that the state is obliged to support them in any situation "it is the duty of the Romanian state to take care of them. They must ensure that they have a home and integrate them into society" (I2), while others have more nationalist visions. "The Romanian state has many problems that it must solve. I don't think we need to spend too many funds on them" or "I don't know how much we can offer them. And if we have, I think we have to save more for Romanian children who don't or the hospitals that are full of sick people.

It is very interesting that, when it comes to government support, opinions are divided, but when it comes to the concrete support that the respondents can offer, the answers are unanimously positive: "each of us must do something for them. I, for example, participated in several support actions right when the war started. I don't see how the world would work otherwise" (I5). Other respondents

consider that the feeling of solidarity and empathy must be developed: "it's a good moment to show that we care about others and not only ourselves"(I7) "parents and school taught us from a young age that it is good to share what we have . If we share the things we have with people who need them more than us, the situation changes", especially in the context in which the Covid-19 pandemic kept us away "social distance also led to an emotional distance: we were alone too much and we forgot how to behave with each other. The refugees give us the opportunity to demonstrate that we are human, that we understand their burden, and that we can come to their support".(I11)

## **Conclusions**

Our study analyzed the perception of the young generation Z regarding the refugees who arrived in Romania because of Ukrainian – the Russian conflict.

Generation Z is characterized by specialists as a digital, informed, socially active, and tolerant generation. Through the interviews we conducted, we managed to confirm this theory. Young people from Romania have information about the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine. Digitally, natives, it is a surprise that most of our respondents say that the information they have about the conflict comes from digital media or social networks.

Our analysis builds on the idea of perception regarding Ukrainian refugees through three elements: attitudes towards the presence of Ukrainians in communities, the effect they produce at the level of individual security, and the role that the state and citizens have in relation to refugees.

Regarding the first element, most of our respondents described positive effects and attitudes. They mentioned economic and cultural elements. Very few of the respondents considered that the presence of Ukrainians also produces negative effects such as the deterioration of diplomatic relations between Romania and the Russian Federation or economic shortcomings.

It is surprising that, although at the community level some opinions are negative, when it comes to individual security, our respondents unanimously mentioned that they do not consider that Ukrainian refugees could affect their individual security.

Regarding their views on how the state should support the refugees, the opinions are divided here as well. The vast majority say that the state must be involved in helping refugees, while few of the respondents have nationalist attitudes considering that Romanian institutions need to be involved in creating a better environment for their own citizens and be less preoccupied with the refugees. Like the previous discussion, when it comes to the role of the ordinary individual, all those questioned are of the opinion that every citizen is obliged to support the refugees.

Our study shows that generation Z in Romania is a generation of informed individuals, who have a critical view of the world and who can get involved socially. Even if opinions are not unanimous regarding some aspects, the

generation of future leaders is a generation that will proactively respond to the future problems of society.

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