

## **FROM VULNERABILITY TO CIVIC LEADERSHIP**

### **A PERSONAL JOURNEY DEDICATED TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

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I do not share my story in order to focus on hardship. I do not share it to seek sympathy, nor to turn my past into a reason for personal admiration. I share it because it explains, more clearly than any CV or list of professional achievements ever could, why I chose to dedicate my life to children, young people, and those who begin life with fewer opportunities than others.

Before becoming the president of an organisation, a doctoral researcher, a civic actor, or the representative of an organisation that is now part of the Eurochild network, I was first a child who experienced vulnerability.

I was a child who learned very early that life does not begin in the same way for everyone. Some children begin life surrounded by stability, protection, affection, confidence, and support. Others begin with uncertainty, unanswered questions, emotional vulnerability, insecurity, and a deep need for belonging and care.

#### **I belonged to the second category.**

I was born in Romania in a context marked by fragility and vulnerability. The beginning of my life was not simple. From an early age, I became familiar with the feeling of searching for my place in the world, trying to understand who I was, and learning how to move forward even when I did not have all the answers.

I did not choose this beginning, just as no child chooses the family, circumstances, or difficulties into which they are born.

Over time, however, I came to understand something essential: although we do not choose our starting point, we can choose what we do with the experiences we have lived through. We can allow pain to close us off from the world, or we can try to transform it into a deeper responsibility toward others. We can remain trapped in our own wounds, or we can learn to look towards those who are going through similar situations and say:

**“You are not alone. You can move forward too.”**

This, in essence, is my story.

It is not the story of a perfect journey. It is the story of a difficult path, walked with perseverance. It is the story of a vulnerable child who discovered through education, faith, work, civic engagement, and the support of people who believed in him that vulnerability does not have to become destiny.

When understood and transformed, vulnerability can become a source of empathy, action, and leadership.

### **Education: The First Space of Reconstruction**

For me, education was never merely a normal stage of life. It was not only about school, diplomas, or qualifications. Education became the first space where reconstruction was possible. It was the place where I began rebuilding confidence, identity, and a sense of purpose.

I learned that education gives a vulnerable child much more than information. It gives dignity. It gives language to tell one’s story. It provides the tools needed to understand the world. It offers the courage to look beyond the limitations into which one was born or raised.

My educational journey has always been closely connected to the search for meaning. I attended the “Saint Andrew” Theological Seminary, in the Cultural Heritage section, where my formation included both humanistic and artistic dimensions, as well as a strong spiritual component. My CV records my national baccalaureate diploma from the “Saint Andrew” Theological Seminary, with a final paper dedicated to the Holy Eucharist.

Later, I studied at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “Dumitru Stăniloae” in Iași, where my academic formation included theology, church history, spirituality, ethics, patristics, classical languages, and other disciplines that shaped both my intellectual and human development. This period offered me not only academic knowledge, but also a deeper understanding of the human person, suffering, responsibility, and service.

At a later stage, I chose to continue my education in a field directly connected to social needs. I completed a Master’s degree in Management of Social and Health Services at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, with a dissertation focused on the management of social services in non-governmental organisations. This stage was important because it helped me understand that social good cannot be built only through good intentions. It also requires structure, management, evaluation, public policy, sustainability, and institutional responsibility.

Today, I am a doctoral researcher in Philology at the University Centre of Pitești, with research dedicated to twentieth-century Orthodox Christian literature, focusing on Gala Galaction and Nicolae Steinhardt. This research continues, in another form, the same concern that has accompanied me throughout my life: how culture, faith, literature, and reflection on the human condition can contribute to forming people who are more conscious, more responsible, and more attentive to the suffering of others.

For Eurochild, I believe this part of my story is important because it shows the transformative power of education. A child who begins life in vulnerability needs access to education not only in order to obtain a profession, but also in order to have the chance to rewrite their future. Education can become the bridge between exclusion and participation, between helplessness and dignity, between fragility and leadership.

### **The Blue Heron Scholarship: When Support Becomes a Turning Point**

There are moments in life when a single opportunity can change the direction of a young person’s future.

For me, one of those defining moments was becoming a scholar of the Blue Heron Foundation Romania. During my university years, I received a scholarship that supported my

studies, but its meaning went far beyond financial assistance. The programme also included mentoring, volunteering, monthly activity reporting, and participation in Blue Heron Foundation camps.

That experience left a deep mark on me.

It was not only about receiving support. It was about feeling that someone believed in my potential. It was about discovering that there were people who did not look at my past as a limitation, but at my future as a possibility.

The Blue Heron scholarship helped me understand what it means when an organisation invests in a young person. Such support can sustain a student, but it can also do much more than that. It can restore confidence. It can create direction. It can open doors. It can help a young person understand that their life is not defined by where they started.

Looking back, I realise that the value of that opportunity was not limited to my university years. It shaped the way I understand support, mentorship, and social responsibility today.

When I now work through A.S.A.T. to create opportunities for vulnerable young people, I often think about the impact that this kind of support had on my own life. In many ways, my work today is also an attempt to pass forward the confidence and encouragement that I once received.

The Blue Heron experience taught me a lesson that remains central to my work: when society invests in a young person, it does not simply support one life. It creates the possibility for that person to become, in time, a source of support for others.

### **Faith, Volunteering, and the Encounter with People**

Another essential part of my formation was connected to community life, spirituality, and volunteering. Since childhood and adolescence, I was involved in religious and community activities. My CV mentions a long period of volunteering at the “Saint Great Martyr Demetrius” Church in Brăilița, between 2003 and 2018, including youth activities, catechetical programmes, liturgical involvement, administrative support, and maintaining relationships with people in the community.

This experience shaped me deeply.

I learned that people do not need only administrative solutions. They also need presence. They need to be listened to. They need to be taken seriously. They need to feel that someone does not pass indifferently by their suffering.

In community life, I met children, young people, families, people in difficulty, and people searching for meaning, support, encouragement, or simply human closeness. There I learned that human vulnerability is not an exception. It is part of life. The difference is made by the way in which communities respond to that vulnerability.

If a community responds with indifference, vulnerability deepens.

If a community responds with solidarity, vulnerability can be transformed into hope.

This lesson stayed with me later, when I began working in civic and social organisations. I came to understand that spirituality, volunteering, and civic engagement are connected by one fundamental question:

**What do we do for the other person?**

### **Work, Responsibility, and the Lessons of Real Life**

My journey was not built only through academic study and civic engagement. I also worked in very different professional contexts, sometimes far from the idealised image people may have of leadership. I worked in private companies, had operational responsibilities, coordinated teams, managed concrete situations, and learned what the discipline of daily work truly means.

My CV includes professional experiences in management and coordination roles, including positions at Mega Image and KFC, as well as other organisational structures. These roles involved team coordination, operational responsibilities, customer relations, procedures, and day-to-day management.

These experiences taught me something very important: no leader can truly understand people's realities without also knowing practical work, the pressure of responsibility, direct relationships with teams, and the challenges of everyday life.

I learned that leadership is not only about vision. It is also about patience. It is about organisation. It is about respect for the people you work with. It is about remaining responsible and dignified even in difficult periods.

For me, every professional experience, including those that seemed temporary or far from my final mission, contributed to my formation. They taught me to be pragmatic, to understand the need for rules, procedures, coordination, communication, and accountability. Today, all these lessons help me in leading A.S.A.T.

### **The Decisive Encounter with Vulnerable Young People**

One of the most important chapters of my life was my involvement in organisations dedicated to young people, especially those facing vulnerability or coming from the child protection system.

I was active within the Institutionalised Youth Council, where I served as Secretary General, Vice President, and Deputy Director of the National Operational Office. This experience brought me into direct contact with the realities of institutionalised young people and those preparing for the transition towards independent living.

There, perhaps more clearly than ever before, I understood that vulnerable young people should not be seen as social problems. They are persons with potential, intelligence, sensitivity, dreams, and the capacity to contribute, if they receive the right support.

Many of these young people do not lack potential. They lack support networks. They lack mentors. They lack people who can help them understand how adult life works: institutions, education, employment, relationships, rights, and responsibilities. They often lack society's trust.

This experience affected me deeply because I recognised fragments of my own story in many of their stories. I understood what it means to need someone to tell you:

**“You are not only your past. You are not only your file. You are not only the social category in which someone has placed you. You are a person with value.”**

From that point on, my social mission became much clearer.

## **Civil Society as a Space for Transformation**

My involvement in civil society was not limited to one organisation. I was part of several associative structures, and each of them helped me understand another dimension of working with people and of organisational responsibility.

I served as Operational Director and later Executive President of YouHub Association, where I contributed to current activity coordination, strategic development, organisational administration, and the implementation of internal decisions. I was also a founding member and Secretary General of Students for Life Iași, later serving as Interim President of the organisation.

These experiences taught me that a non-governmental organisation needs two things in equal measure: heart and structure.

Heart alone is not enough, because good intentions without organisation can be lost. Structure alone is not enough, because bureaucracy without humanity does not change lives. Both are needed: empathy and management, ideals and procedures, vision and implementation capacity.

I learned how to prepare documents, coordinate meetings, work with teams, represent organisations, build strategies, and understand the legal and moral responsibility of leadership. All of this prepared me, in a way, for the next step: creating and leading the Solidarity and Action for Youth Association.

## **Why A.S.A.T. Exists**

The Solidarity and Action for Youth Association A.S.A.T. is not only an organisation I lead. It is the expression of a deeply personal conviction.

It was born from the belief that solidarity must not remain only a feeling. It must become action.

It was born from the conviction that young people should not be seen only as beneficiaries, but as partners, social actors, and future leaders.

From my personal and professional experience, I came to understand that every young person needs at least three things: trust, opportunities, and a space where their voice matters.

Since 16 February 2024, I have served as President of the Solidarity and Action for Youth Association, a role that includes representing the organisation, coordinating the work of the Board of Directors, ensuring the application of the statute and internal regulations, and publicly representing the position of the association.

In my professional profile, I stated that I wish to be a voice dedicated to the common good, with a deep commitment to education and community development. This is not merely an institutional phrase. It expresses the deeper direction of my life.

Through A.S.A.T., I want to build projects and initiatives that help young people discover their potential, participate in democratic life, acquire independent living skills, access education, receive support during moments of transition, and feel that they belong to a community.

For me, A.S.A.T. is a concrete answer to a simple question:

**What can we do so that a vulnerable child or young person is not defined by their disadvantages?**

My answer is this:

We can build communities, projects, partnerships, and policies that create real opportunities.

### **From Personal Story to Public Mission**

What I lived did not remain only in the private sphere. Over time, my experiences became part of a public mission. Not because I wanted exposure, but because I understood that some stories can become useful when placed in the service of a greater purpose.

If my story becomes known within the Eurochild network, I would like it to convey a simple and powerful message:

Vulnerable children are not lost cases.

Young people growing up in difficulty are not condemned to marginalisation.

People who have experienced a lack of support can, in time, become creators of support for others.

This is the deep connection between my life and A.S.A.T.

I did not build this organisation out of formal ambition. I built it because I understood how much it matters for a young person to have access to people, opportunities, and institutions that take them seriously.

### **A.S.A.T. and Eurochild: A Meeting of Shared Values**

A.S.A.T.'s accession to Eurochild is, for me, one of the most important moments in the development of the organisation. Eurochild is not only a European network. It is a space of solidarity, expertise, advocacy, and action for children's rights.

For A.S.A.T., the status of Associate Member of Eurochild is an opportunity to learn, to contribute, and to build relevant European partnerships. It is a chance to bring into the network the perspective of Romania, of vulnerable young people, of local communities, and of our direct experience in civil society.

The values promoted by Eurochild — children's rights, participation, social inclusion, the protection of vulnerable children, and the involvement of civil society — are deeply connected to the mission of A.S.A.T. For me, this connection is not only institutional. It is personal.

I have lived close enough to vulnerability to understand why these values must not remain only in strategic documents. They must become reality.

Eurochild can offer A.S.A.T. a European framework for learning and collaboration. A.S.A.T., in turn, can contribute with direct experience, with perspectives from Romania, and with the willingness to develop initiatives dedicated to vulnerable children and young people.

## **What I Hope This Story Will Convey**

If this story reaches other people — organisations, leaders, young people, or children facing difficulties — I hope it will convey several simple ideas.

The first is that the beginning of life should not decide its end. A child born or raised in a vulnerable context should not be reduced to that context. They need real opportunities, not labels.

The second is that education can change destinies. Not only through diplomas, but through its ability to restore dignity, confidence, and direction.

The third is that civil society has an essential role. Non-governmental organisations can reach places where institutions sometimes struggle to reach. They can listen, adapt, create communities, and transform real needs into concrete projects.

The fourth is that vulnerable young people must be involved, not only helped. They should not be merely the beneficiaries of policies or projects. They should be part of shaping them. They must be asked, listened to, and supported to become actors in their own lives.

The fifth is that a Europe for children and young people is not built only at institutional level. It is also built through human stories, local communities, organisations large and small, and people who choose to transform their own experience into responsibility for others.

## **A Message to Vulnerable Children and Young People**

If I could speak directly to a child or young person who is facing difficulties today, I would say this:

You are not defined by what happened to you.

You are not less valuable because you started with fewer opportunities.

You are not condemned to marginalisation because life did not offer you the same chances as others.

You have the right to be heard.

You have the right to learn.

You have the right to make mistakes and start again.

You have the right to dream.

You have the right to be supported.

And above all, you have the right to become more than others believed you could become.

I do not believe that every difficult story automatically becomes a success story. It would be unfair to say that. But I do believe that every child deserves the conditions that make such a transformation possible.

That is why organisations such as A.S.A.T. exist.

That is why networks such as Eurochild matter.

That is why it is important to continue speaking about children's rights, inclusion, participation, and real support.

### **Conclusion: Solidarity Must Become Action**

Looking back, I cannot separate the person I am today from the child I once was. I cannot separate my civic work from my personal experiences. I cannot separate A.S.A.T. from the journey that brought me here.

Everything I have lived has taught me that vulnerability should neither be romanticised nor ignored. It must be understood and met with responsibility.

Children and young people facing difficulties do not need beautiful speeches alone. They need policies, organisations, education, mentors, services, communities, and real opportunities.

A.S.A.T. was born from this conviction: solidarity must be transformed into action.

It is not enough to care. We must build.

It is not enough to speak about inclusion. We must create spaces where inclusion becomes real.

It is not enough to say that young people matter. We must give them a place at the table, a voice in decision-making, and confidence in their own potential.

My story is, ultimately, the story of a child who needed support and who, as an adult, chose to build support for others. It is the story of a personal transformation that became a public mission. It is the story of a simple conviction: every child deserves a real chance.

And sometimes, when a child receives that chance, they can become the adult who opens doors for other children.

This is my mission.

This is the mission of A.S.A.T.

And this is the contribution we wish to bring to the Eurochild network: an authentic voice from Romania, shaped by experience, education, solidarity, and a deep commitment to transforming vulnerability into dignity, participation, and hope.

### **Short Editorial Introduction for Eurochild**

Alexandru Napoleon-Valentin is the President of the Solidarity and Action for Youth Association A.S.A.T., a Romanian organisation dedicated to supporting vulnerable children and young people, promoting social inclusion, education, youth participation, and community development. His personal journey, shaped by vulnerability, education, faith, work, civic engagement, and the support of people who believed in his potential, inspired him to transform his own experience into a public mission. Through A.S.A.T., he works to create opportunities, dignity, and meaningful participation for young people who begin life with fewer chances.

**Președinte,**

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