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EDUCATIONAL
FORUM

Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme

#BridgeTheGap:
between Policy and
Practice for Youth Participation
in Albania, North Macedonia
and Serbia



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Executive Summary

Ensuring that young people are represented in policy making guarantees that their needs, worries, and goals are adequately taken into account. This policy paper aims to explore the gap between youth participation in policy making in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. It offers a broad perspective on the topic and includes findings and recommendations analysed from various stakeholders that work with youth in the region. The analysis builds on an exploration of the institutional and legislative framework in the three countries, complemented with findings from semi-structured interviews with representatives from civil society and youth organisations, in depth interviews with senior governmental officials and policy makers, as well as an online survey administered in the three local languages.

Main findings indicate that lack of trust in public institutions and opportunities for engagement were identified as the main reasons for disengagement from youth in decision-making, while more investment should be made towards revising the communication channels and narratives to empower youth, including those that are more vulnerable and hard to reach. The concluding recommendations urge for the establishment of innovative pathways for including youth voices as well as for strengthened youth positions and engagement in the political and social life of the community.

Key takeaways:

- *Increasing youth involvement in decision-making processes* by improving the collaboration between youth and elected officials through formal channels of communication, such as youth advisory bodies, local youth councils, and creation of universal digital tools for proactive political participation.
- *Increasing the number of young elected officials*, especially in institutions directly involved in the creation and implementation of youth-related policies.
- *Strengthening the civic sector* by incorporating a comprehensive civic education in the schools' curricula, as well as promoting participation in youth organisations as extra curricular activities.
- *Ensure sustainable funding mechanisms and support*: The availability of proper support and funding emerged as a crucial factor in strengthening the sustainability of youth projects and initiatives and their long-term planning and effective outcomes.
- *Putting a greater focus on hard to reach youth*, mainly young people living in rural areas who have a limited access to both political and civic participation.

- *Greater utilisation of digital platforms* by both the governments and the civic sector as the most convenient way to hear the youth's voices.

To meet these goals and amplify youth voices within a country, a synergistic collaboration between government bodies, non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, and the youth themselves is needed.



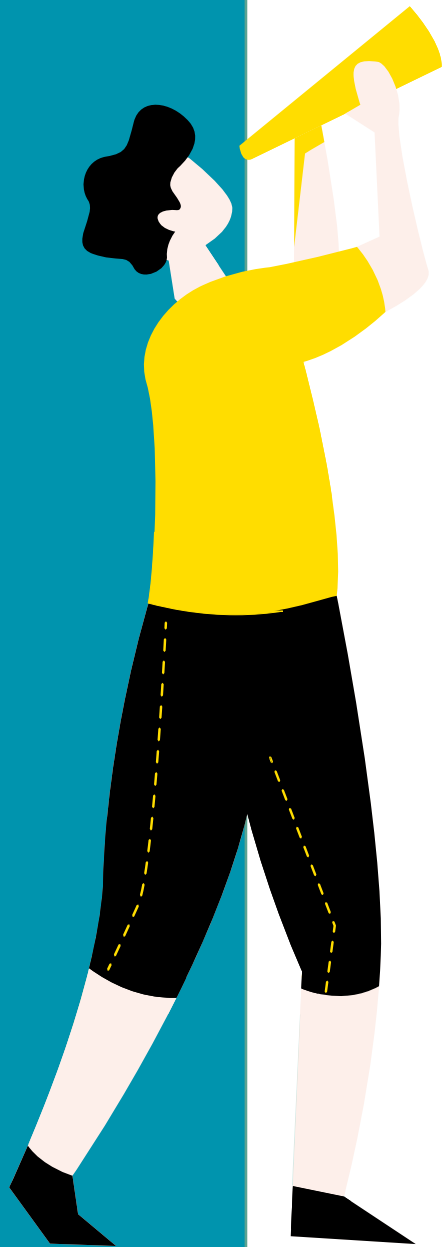
1. Introduction

In today's global governance, youth participation is crucial for shaping policy and societal progress. Western Balkans countries, including Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, recognize this importance but face obstacles to meaningful youth engagement. Despite efforts by governments and civil society to involve young people in policymaking, there remains a communication gap between youth and government institutions. This hinders access to information and resources for civic engagement, limiting youth participation in politics and civic life.

In North Macedonia, an overwhelming proportion of youth share a concerning disinterest in political affairs and developments in their country (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2019). The main reasons for these behaviours are the lack of knowledge and understanding of politics, low exposure to information about political education at school, lack of trust and scepticism towards political figures, as well as an active "switch off" from the regular news cycle as a way of preserving their mental health (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2019). Similarly in Albania, the low level of youth engagement in politics is a result of a widespread lack of trust in politics and the absence of merit-based models of advancement in politics, built on fair competition (Bino, 2021). In Serbia, while growing youth movements are leveraging digital platforms to demand political inclusion, the inadequacy of institutional support and resources remains a great impediment (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2019). However, in comparison to the other two countries, Serbia has set up some mechanisms for youth participation in policy-making through Youth Structured Dialogue, which still needs strengthening to ensure full inclusion and participation of young people in the political life of the community (Bino, 2021).

In view of the challenges faced in these countries, it is important to recognize that empowering youth within the decision-making fabric of society necessitates a concerted and multifaceted approach. This policy paper delves into a comprehensive examination of the existing landscape across the three countries, aiming to investigate the challenges and opportunities that influence youth participation, while also exploring the dimension of digital avenues and technological leverage for youth participation. The research process involved a thorough literature and institutional review, whereas primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and an online survey.

Finally, the policy paper proposes recommendations which intend to contribute to the development of more vibrant, inclusive and resilient youth communities in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia as well as elevate the role and engagement of youth within their societies.



2. An Overview of Youth Participation

2.1. Country Level Perspectives

Albania

Known for its youthful population, in Albania, 15–29 year olds account for 23.4% of the total population of Albania (INSTAT, 2020). A 2018 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study recognised the strong government focus on youth participation, catalysed by the progress made in creating a conducive environment for youth participation with the approval of the Law 75/2019 on Youth in 2019. The law also introduced the obligation for local governmental units to establish Local Youth Councils. Various forms of youth representation, such as Youth Parliament, Student Governments, youth forums, informal groups, and local youth councils, are currently active in Albania, offering potential recruitment avenues for Local Youth Councils. (EU Policy Hub Albania, 2021) However, concrete initiatives to support youth participation vary across municipalities, with only a few receiving assistance from foreign donors and non-governmental organisations (Bino, 2021).¹

A significant step forward occurred in 2021 when the Minister of State for Youth and Children was established, alongside the creation of the National Youth Agency. Subsequently, in October 2022, the National Youth Strategy and the National Youth Action Plan 2022–2029 were adopted after extensive consultations with young people, youth organisations, and stakeholders. These developments underline a strong commitment to involving young people in policies and issues that affect them, reflecting Albania’s dedication to youth participation and influence on relevant matters.

Further on, the National Youth Congress (NYC) of Albania, a youth-led organisation founded in 2013, has been dedicated to enhancing the involvement and influence of young people in decision-making processes, both nationally and locally. However, their research has revealed a significant disparity in participation rates between urban and suburban/rural youth. This divide challenges achieving full empowerment and participation of youth in various decision-making processes. (National Youth Congress, 2019)

¹ For example, the National Youth Congress with the support of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), has supported 12 municipalities in Albania to develop Local Youth Plans for 2020-2023, including a specific budget for each activity. See more information at: <https://krk.al/category/en/fes/>

Another major concern for youth participation in Albania is the lack of evidence-based policy formulation in the youth sector, leading to a deficiency of data-driven program interventions. This gap, as highlighted by Lula (2021) needs comprehensive attention to create more inclusive policies based on credible research.

Despite progress in youth policy and funding systems, Albania still needs to enhance its efforts to establish a functional system that promotes inclusion, addresses young people's needs, and empowers them. (Bino, 2021) The challenge lies in raising awareness among young individuals about their role in decision-making and ensuring the availability of necessary resources and support structures.

North Macedonia

Youth participation in North Macedonia, where young people account for 17.8% of the population, has been teetering on a precarious edge for the past decade. (North Macedonia census, 2021) Despite numerous initiatives and legal reforms aimed at empowering young individuals, there have been significant challenges in translating these efforts into action.

The primary legislation governing youth participation is the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020), which was enacted after an extensive process lasting almost a decade. This law encompasses a wide range of areas, including youth organising, young people's involvement in policy-making and decision-making processes, the development of strategic documents at national and local levels, and actions taken by government bodies to enhance the status of young people in society, as well as collaborative planning for youth-related activities. (National Youth Council of Macedonia, 2022) The law entrusts the National Agency for Youth and Sport with the responsibility of monitoring youth organising and mandates a minimum allocation of 0.3% of the national budget and 0.1% of local municipalities' budgets for its implementation.

The law also initiates the forming of the main mechanisms for youth participation at the national and local levels: National Youth Assembly, Local Youth Councils, and a National Advisory Body for Youth Policies. However, as of now, the National Youth Assembly still hasn't formed, and neither has the National Advisory Body for Youth Policies. As for Local Youth Councils, only 12% of the municipalities (10 in total) in the country have formed them, although the official deadline for their forming was January 2021. (National Youth Council of Macedonia, 2022)

A positive step has been taken by the Agency for Youth and Sport in the preparation of the new National Youth Strategy 2023 – 2027, which is supposed to succeed the old and outdated National Youth Strategy 2016 – 2025. (Agency for Youth and Sport – comments on the draft text for the National Youth Strategy 2023 – 2025). As for its shortcomings, the initial draft of the strategy predicts no digital tools for increasing youth participation at either the local, or national level, even though it notes the technological developments of the past decade and the increased usage of such technologies by the youth. (Draft text of the National Strategy for Youth 2023 – 2027)

Furthermore, youth in North Macedonia lack real representation in the main legislative body – the National Assembly. Only 4 of the current MPs (a total of 3.33%) are under 29 years. (Galevski and Gjorgjievska, 2020). On the other hand, none of the current ministers in the Government of North Macedonia are under the age of 29.

In conclusion, youth participation in North Macedonia faces various challenges, including limited representation in politics, lack of opportunities for education and professional development, lack of digital tools for higher participation in the decision-making processes, and a gap between policy and practice regarding the Law on youth participation and youth policies. To best address these issues, a stronger collaboration between the government and civil sector is needed, mainly to create more opportunities for young people who are growingly faced with strong apathy towards social engagement.

Serbia

The government of Serbia has been increasingly focusing on youth participation, in a country where nearly a quarter of its citizens are aged 15–30 years old. To support youth engagement, Serbia has established a legal and institutional framework, including the Law on Youth (2011), which highlights nine key areas among which are youth employment and education. The Ministry of Tourism and Youth is instrumental in implementing youth policies and collaborating with various youth organisations. However, there are existing challenges in the youth sector, notably a limited youth budget, constituting only 0.09% of the annual public budget, affecting the sustainability of youth organisations. (National Report Serbia, 2019) Additionally, there is a need for better mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the National Youth Strategy, as well as improved coordination and communication among relevant ministries and municipal youth offices. (Regional Cooperation Council, 2021).

In terms of political participation, young people face limited representation in decision-making processes. However, a growing youth activist movement is leveraging social media and digital tools to demand greater political inclusion. In civil society, young individuals actively participate in organisations, advocating for various causes like environmental protection and social justice, but funding constraints hinder their sustainability (National Youth Council of Serbia, 2018).

Additionally, evidence-based policy-making remains a challenge in the youth sector. Although the National Youth Strategy emphasises the importance of evidence in shaping policies, there is a shortage of comprehensive and continuous research on youth issues. Independent institutions and organisations conducting youth research often lack recognition and support, leading to limited data and insights for evidence-based decision-making. Insufficient funding for research at both local and national levels further hampers the quality of annual research conducted by the Ministry of Tourism and Youth (National Report Serbia, 2019).

The education system is another area where youth participation is restricted. This disconnect between education and the demands of the modern world contributes to a sense of disengagement among young individuals, as they perceive that their education does not adequately prepare them for their future roles in society. Addressing these educational challenges and empowering young people with the necessary skills and knowledge will be essential in fostering active and informed youth participation in all aspects of Serbian society (National Youth Council of Serbia, 2022)

In summary, Serbia has taken steps to promote youth participation through legal frameworks and government institutions. However, challenges in funding, coordination, and political representation still exist. To boost youth engagement, it's essential to tackle these challenges and provide more opportunities for young people to actively participate in decision-making processes.

2.2. Methodology

The policy paper employs a mixed methods approach. The first phase included desk research to provide a better understanding of the institutional and legal landscapes of each country. The latter phase entailed the following:

- Three semi-structured interviews with high-ranking government officials responsible for youth affairs offered a window into the machinery that propels youth-centric policies. The interview focus was conceptualised to address the challenges and opportunities in all three countries.
- Three focus group discussions with representatives from civil society and organisations working with youth provided a platform for voices often unheard, enabling young individuals and stakeholders to articulate their lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations within the realm of youth engagement.
- In addition, an online survey in the three local languages, targeting young people in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia was administered during June – August 2023 through Google Survey Forms and shared through social media channels and email outreach. The survey collected 103 responses, the majority of which were from youth in urban areas, belonging to the 18–30 age group. The table below provides an overview of the descriptive statistics.

Table 1: Survey’s Sample and Demographics

Demographics’ overview by Country	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia
Sample (number) of participants in online survey	48	22	33
Gender	70.8 % identified as women; 27.1% identified as men; and 2.1 % identified as other	54.5% identified as women; and 45.5% identified as men	60.6% identified as women; and 39.4 % identified as men
Age (years old) ²	10.4% = 15–18 y.o 85.4 % = 18–30 y.o	22.7% = 15–18 y.o 68.2% = 18–30 y.o	42.4% = 15–18 y.o 54.5% = 18–30 y.o
Geographical Background (urban or rural area)	93.8% coming from urban areas and 6.3% coming from rural areas	95.5% coming from urban areas and 4.5% coming from rural areas	63.6% coming from urban areas and 36.4% coming from rural areas
Education	87.5% graduated with a graduate-level’s degree and 12.5% other education	72.7% graduated from secondary studies, 13.6% with a graduate-level’s degree and 13.6% graduated from primary studies	75.8% graduated from secondary education and 15.2% with a graduate-level’s degree
Employment	62.5 % in employment, 8.3% unemployed, and 35.4% studying	40.9% in employment, 13.6% unemployed, and 54.5% studying	91.% in employment, 9.1% unemployed and 87.9% studying

² The youth age group used for the purpose of this study was based on the national legislation frameworks and Youth Law contexts in the three countries explored in this paper. For Albania and North Macedonia, the national legislation recognises as youth the age group 15-29 years old, whereas for Serbia 15-30 years old. The study uses an overall medium range by considering as key youth age groups those belonging from 15 years old to 30 years old.

2.3 Merits and Limits

The online survey's limited responses and lack of diversity raise a significant limitation. This may affect the generalizability of findings, as it might not represent a wide range of perspectives, especially those without internet access or digital literacy. Furthermore, the methodology's engagement with stakeholders through interviews and focus group discussions introduces the possibility of response biases.

However, despite its own limitations, the study has addressed the broad topic of youth participation and engagement by incorporating various emerging aspects such as that of technological and digital developments. Furthermore, it has been based on a participatory approach and multi-stakeholder perspective by including in a direct, inclusive and open way relevant stakeholders working in the field of youth as well as young people themselves.



3. Findings and Analysis

3.1. Governmental Stakeholder Involvement in the Youth Sector

This section unveils insights collected from interviews conducted with pertinent stakeholders operating within the youth sector across Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The interview process sheds light on multifaceted challenges and responsibilities bound to youth-related matters. Moreover, it underscores the pivotal significance of coordination, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement in navigating this intricate terrain.

The interviews reveal that effective engagement and collaboration among governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations, civil society entities, and youth themselves are the cornerstones for addressing the complex challenges faced by young individuals. It is also important to emphasise that the youth sector’s dynamics require not only comprehensive policies but also a synchronised effort to implement and monitor their impact.

Table 2: Governmental Stakeholder Involvement on the Youth Sector

Key Addressed Issues	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia
Opportunities	<p>1– <i>Collaborative orientation</i>, aligning efforts with governmental agencies and civil society organisations including the National Youth Agency.</p> <p>2– <i>Regional cooperation</i> through partnerships such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office to provide more opportunities for young individuals beyond national boundaries.</p>	<p>1– <i>Empowerment of youth at the local level</i> especially in rural and marginalised communities through the creation of local youth councils.</p>	<p>1– <i>Collaborative approach</i> with local agencies and municipal youth offices to empower young citizens and drive community-level change.</p> <p>2– <i>Regional cooperation</i> focused on investing in opportunities to counter the threat of brain drain and creating pools of experts and young professionals from the region.</p>
Challenges	<p>1– <i>Limited availability of opportunities, outreach and inclusion of marginalised and hard-to-reach groups.</i></p>	<p>1– <i>Lack of executive power and dedicated human resources</i> to address diverse youth-related matters.</p>	<p>1– <i>Difficulties with policy alignment on cross-cutting youth issues, and lack of awareness-raising.</i></p>
Digital avenues and technological leverage for youth participation	<p>1– <i>Focus on harnessing modern tools</i>, particularly social media and online platforms, to bridge communication gaps and facilitate youth engagement.</p> <p>2– Investing in projects that are focused on <i>digital literacy</i>.</p>	<p>1– Directing efforts to <i>digitising services for citizens and youth</i> in order to disseminate information and raise awareness on available opportunities for youth engagement.</p>	<p>1– Utilising <i>online platforms to engage and include youth</i> coming from diverse backgrounds.</p>

3.2. Stakeholder Perspectives from the Civil Society

In a quest to fully comprehend the nuances of youth participation and engagement, the focus group discussions served as an inclusive and participatory approach to gather valuable insights on youth participation and engagement. By engaging diverse stakeholders, this approach generated a wealth of invaluable insights that shed light on multifaceted facets of youth involvement within democratic processes. These discussions provided a platform for stakeholders to highlight various aspects and challenges related to youth engagement encompassing realms such as online activism, technology accessibility, representation, as well as the pivotal role of training and education in fostering capacity-building within the youth sector.

Table 3: Stakeholder Perspectives from the Civil Society

Key Addressed Issues	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia
Opportunities	1– <i>Empowerment of youth through professional training, education, and improved access to the labour market through exchange programs and civic activism.</i>	1– <i>Bridging the discord between political affiliations through gathering youth from both sides – those that are politically affiliated with those that are not.</i>	1– <i>Broader regional youth cooperation for more mobility and youth empowerment.</i>
Challenges	1– <i>Ownership and Co-governance</i> is a challenge to be addressed together with the need to involve young people in decision-making processes. 2– <i>Testing new and innovative forms of youth participation</i> for youth digital activism.	1– <i>Lack of trust in public institutions</i> and information sharing for opportunities for engagement. 2– <i>Ensuring sustainability</i> and financial mechanisms to support youth work.	1– <i>Narratives and Communication:</i> addressing political propaganda and negative narratives on youth cooperation, regional engagement, and decision-making Youth 2– <i>Ensuring long-term and sustainable funding and support.</i>
Digital avenues and technological leverage for youth participation	1– <i>Strong needs to consider a balance between traditional and modern engagement methods to ensure effective youth participation</i> , while also investing in digital literacy and acquiring new skills in the youth field.	1– <i>Addressing the digital divide</i> and investing in tailor-made approaches where communication reaches youth in modern and innovative ways.	1– <i>Providing education and information to young people and strengthening digital literacy</i> in the community.

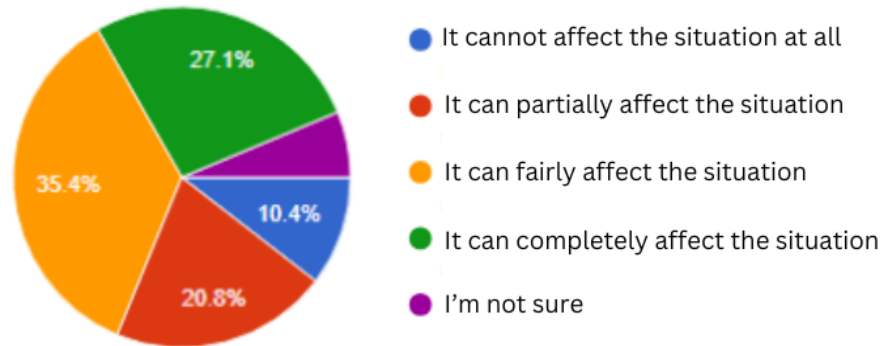
3.3. YOU(th) Perspectives Survey

The YOU(th) Perspectives online survey was disseminated in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, administered during June – August 2023 through Google Survey Forms and shared through social media channels and email outreach. The goal of the survey was to identify the perceptions of young people, which will later help create more informed decisions and evidence-based policy initiatives for increasing youth participation in decision-making. The survey also supported us in identifying gaps and developing recommendations for policymakers and civil society groups regarding this problem, while also raising public awareness of the importance of youth participation as a whole.

3.3.1. Perception of Youth in Albania

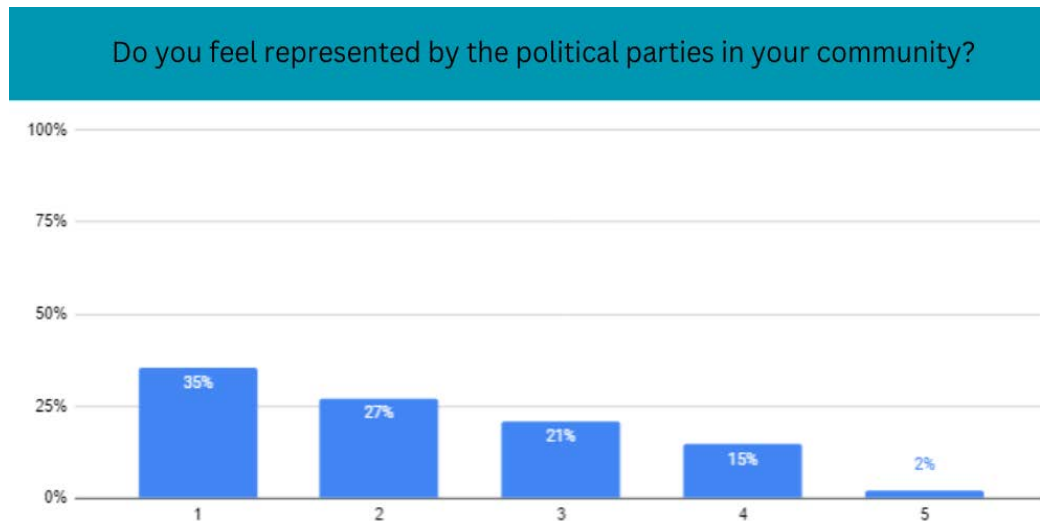
Young people in Albania mostly agree (35.4%) that someone might be able to change the situation in their country through democratic engagement in voting during electoral processes. Another 27.1 % are entirely hopeful that voting will bring change.

Figure 1. Perception of youth in Albania regarding the influence of their vote



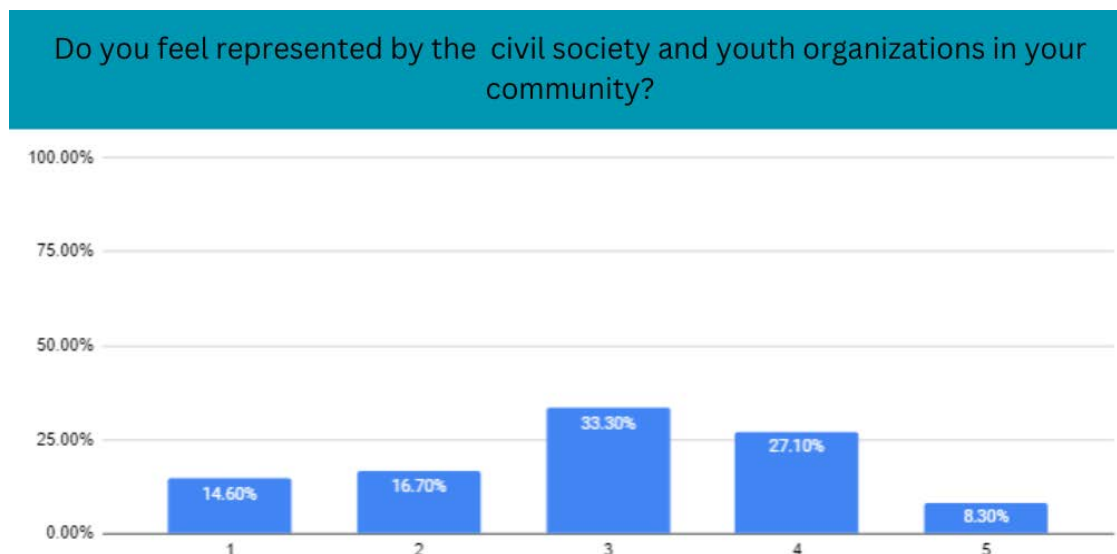
When asked about political representation, young people in Albania do not feel represented by political parties in Albania. When asked about the reasons why they stated that lack of trust, corruption, and a lack of a strong opposition party makes them feel unrepresented and not heard by the current political parties in Albania.

Figure 2. Level of youth representation by the political parties in Albania



Furthermore, young people in Albania do not feel properly represented by non-governmental organisations in Albania. The majority of them were neutral when asked about how represented they feel by the civil society in their country. When asked about the reasons behind they indicated that they feel that non-governmental organisations do not raise concrete concerns in relation to youth issues and needs, and their initiatives go often unnoticed or not properly planned for the long-run.

Figure 3. Level of youth representation by the civil society and youth organisations in Albania



However, when asked in comparison with other actors in the political and social life, young people in Albania expressed more trust and felt more represented by non-governmental organisations compared to local or national governmental agencies or ministries responsible for youth. In terms of their influence in decision making, young people in Albania stated that they can influence it partially or to a certain extent through their active engagement. Regarding the sources they use to get access and information on youth initiatives and related news, young people stated that social media was their most trusted source, followed by traditional media and the online communication channels of non-governmental organisations.

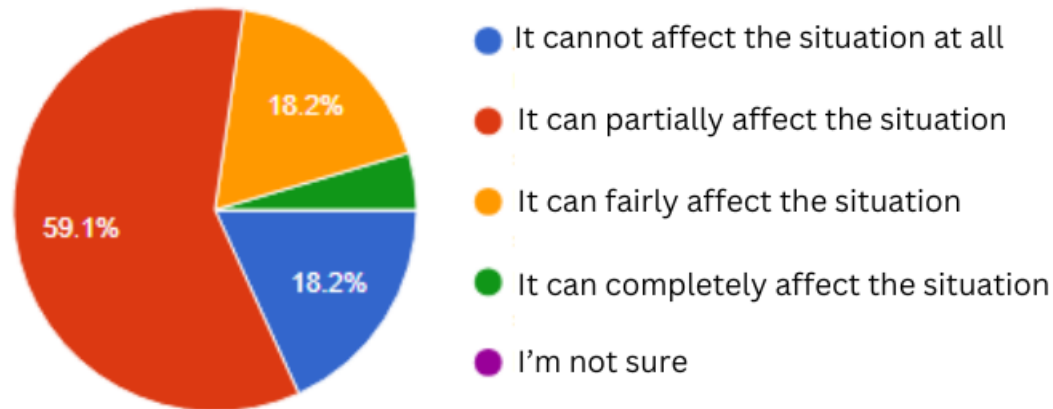
Figure 4. Average scores of some civic/political actors and stakeholders based on how well they represent the interests of youth in Albania



3.3.2. Perception of Youth in North Macedonia

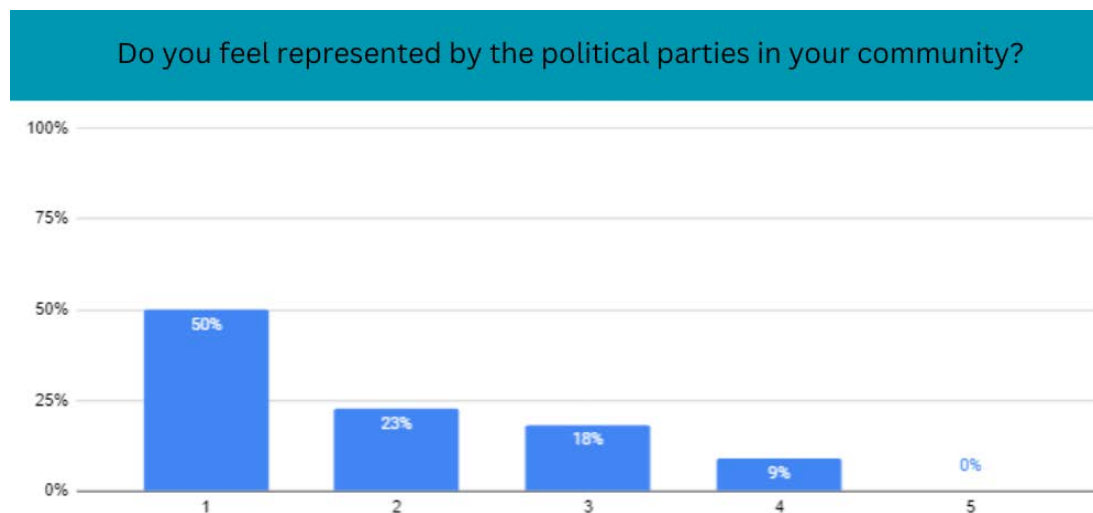
Regarding their power to make a change with just their vote on regular elections, more than 59% of the youth thinks their vote is only somewhat meaningful, while another 18% answered that you can't do any change with voting. This left only around 23% of the respondents feeling somewhat or very optimistic about their voting powers in the current status quo.

Figure 5. Perception of youth in North Macedonia regarding the influence of their vote



On the answer of how represented they feel by the political parties in their community, where they were offered a grading scale from 1 to 5, the youth in North Macedonia gave rather negative scores overall. 50% of them answered with "1", while none of them answered "5" on this question, leaving an average score of 1.8 – the lowest average score on this question out of all three countries.

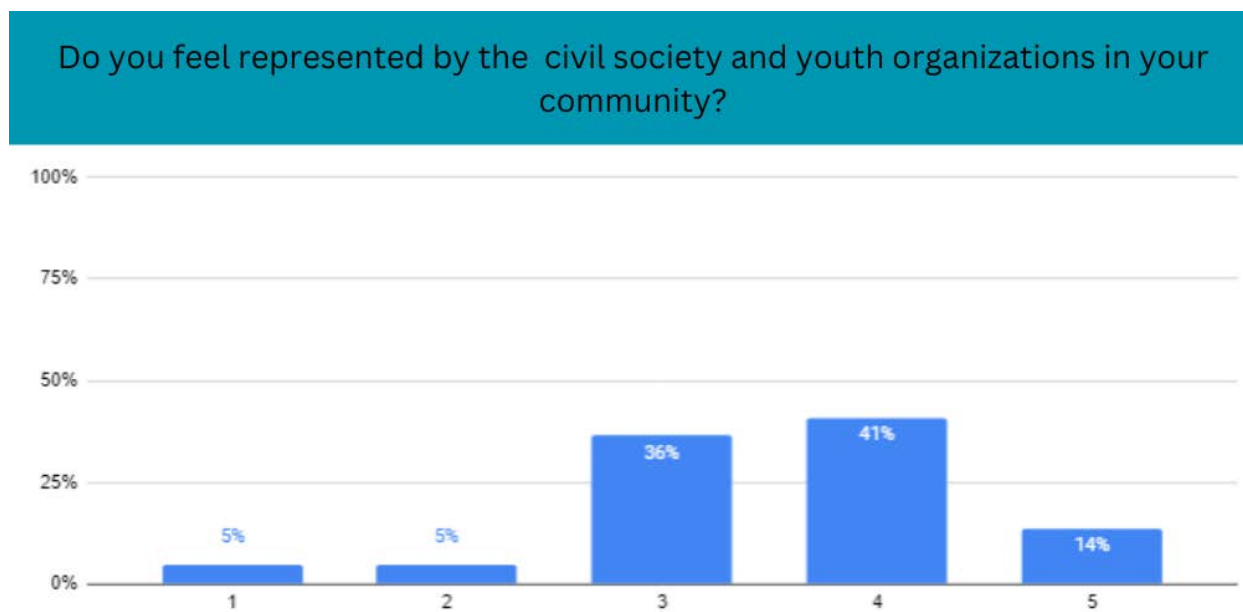
Figure 6. Level of youth representation by the political parties in North Macedonia



When asked to state the reasons for their low feeling of representation, most answers circled around the effect of corruption as the main one, along with general distrust in politicians who aren't standing for any notable change.

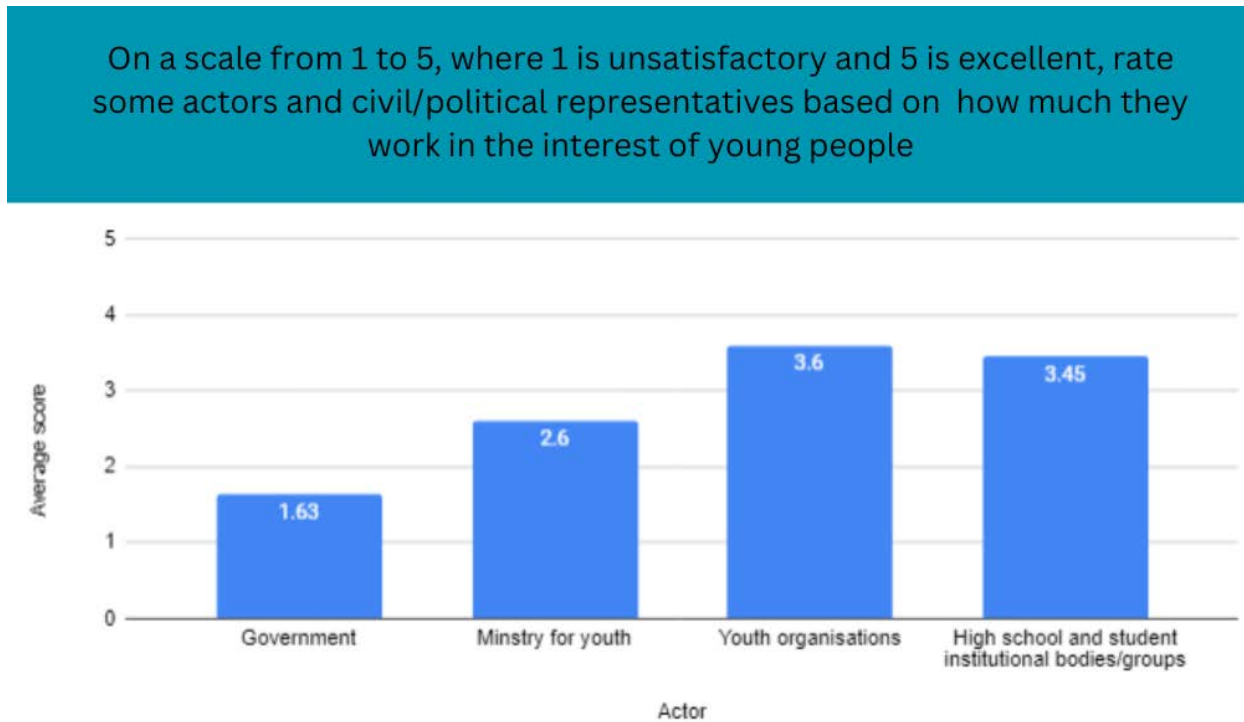
On the other hand, when asked to grade how represented they feel by the non-governmental and youth organisations, the youth in North Macedonia gave much more positive feedback. The average score on this question, also on a scale from 1 to 5, was 3.54.

Figure 7. Level of youth representation by the civil society and youth organisations in North Macedonia



The outcome was similar to the question of grading certain stakeholders from 1 to 5, based on how satisfied they are with their work. Here, youth organisations and high-school/student bodies scored the highest, while national and local governmental institutions, as well as political parties, scored rather low.

Figure 8. Average scores of some civic/political actors and stakeholders based on how well they represent the interests of youth in North Macedonia

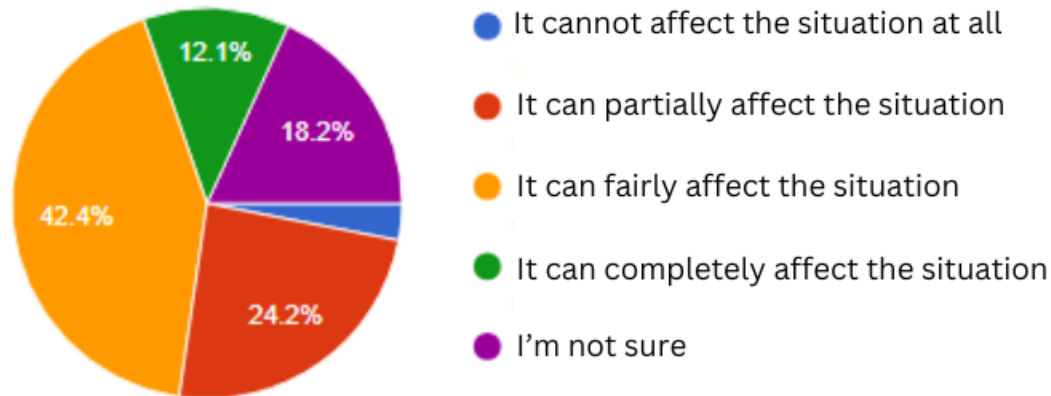


3.3.3. Perception of Youth in Serbia

Young people from Serbia generally agree that voting has enough influence for it to matter. More than half of them gave an optimistic answer to the question "... to what extent can one influence the situation in the country by voting?", with 42.4% saying they feel their vote has a solid impact, but only 12.1% of them thought you could absolutely impact the situation purely by voting.

Figure 9. Perception of youth in Serbia regarding the influence of their vote

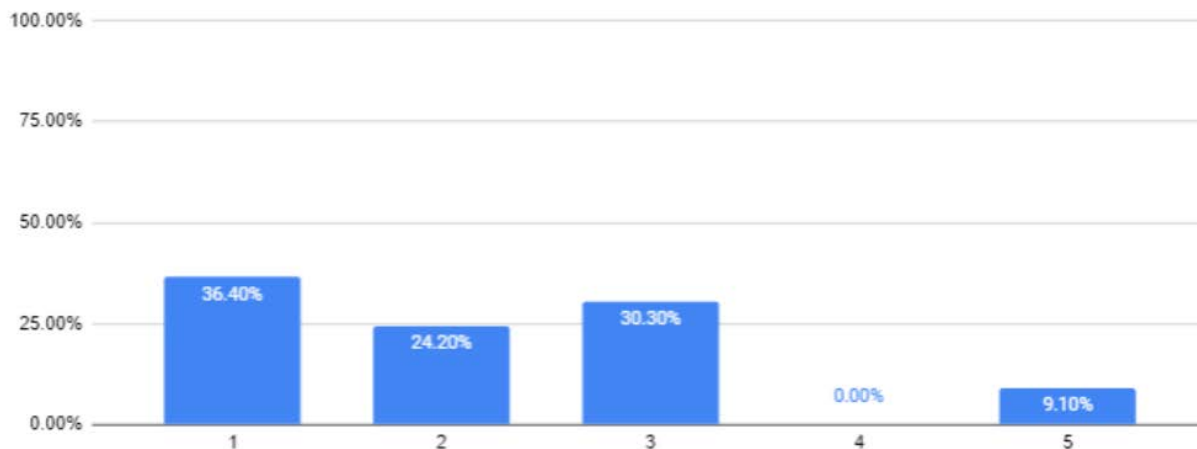
Regardless of whether you have the right to vote, in your opinion, how much can voting affect the situation in the country?



However, on the question whether they feel represented by the political parties in their community, with the answer being a grading scale from 1 to 5, the respondents gave mostly negative scores, averaging 2.2. The main reasons behind this feeling were said to be lack of involvement of young people into the parties' programs and activities, which made youth and students in Serbia feel "like second-class citizens", left with no activities for proper engagement.

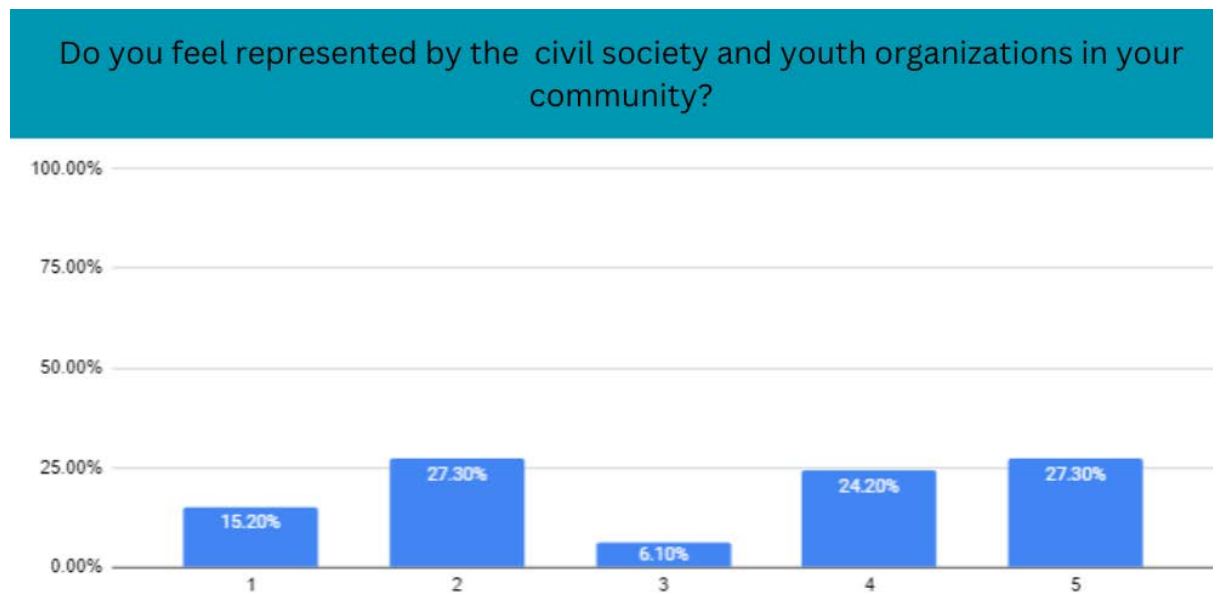
Figure 10. Level of youth representation by the political parties in Serbia

Do you feel represented by the political parties in your community?



When asked whether they feel represented by the non-governmental and youth organisations in their country, the answers painted a rather interesting and unclear picture. This question also had a grading scale answer from 1 to 5, and the average score among the young people from Serbia turned out to be 3.12. Moreover, the votes were almost evenly split between the high and the low scores, with 27.3% of the answers being a "2", and another 27.3% being a "5", while only 6% of the respondents gave "3", or the dead middle, as their answer. This paints the picture that the young population is pretty divided when it comes to their perception of youth organisations and non-governmental organisations in the country.

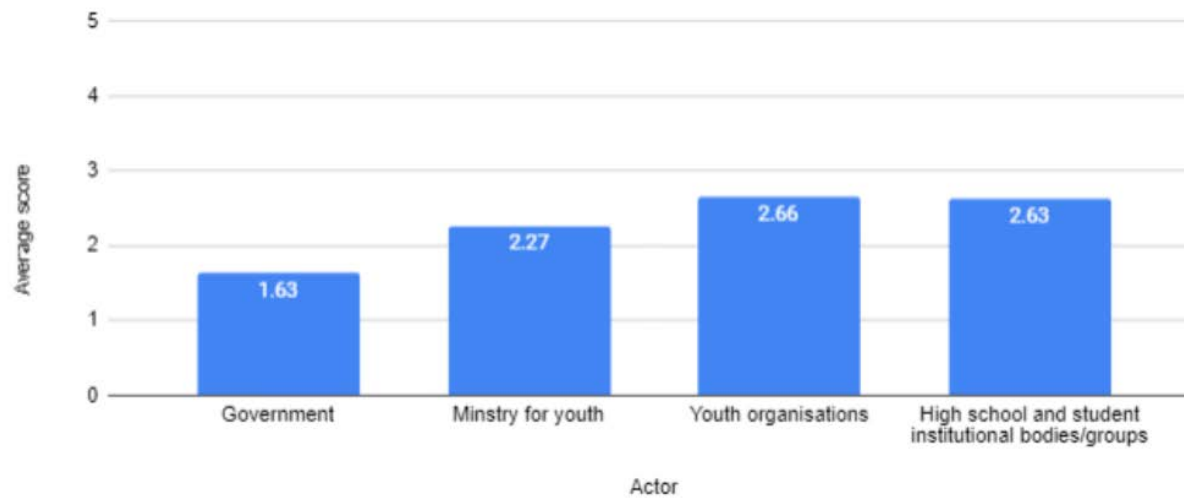
Figure 11. Level of youth representation by the civil society and youth organisations in Serbia



However, when comparing various political stakeholders, the picture becomes clearer that young people in Serbia trust youth organisations and high school or student representative bodies much more than their government, and believe they work in greater interest to their demographic than the national government does.

Figure 12. Average scores of some civic/political actors and stakeholders based on how well they represent the interests of youth in Serbia

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is unsatisfactory and 5 is excellent, rate some actors and civil/political representatives based on how much they work in the interest of young people



4. Recommendations

In this section, we outline a set of key recommendations derived from our analysis and research findings. These recommendations aim to provide guidance and actionable steps to address the challenges identified in the previous sections. They serve as a roadmap for stakeholders, policymakers, and interested parties to effect positive change, foster improvement, and achieve the desired outcomes.

4.1. To Governments

- *Increase Youth Involvement in Decision-Making:* Governments should actively recognize youth as valuable contributors to society and prioritise their full inclusion in decision-making processes, including hard-to-reach and vulnerable youth. Initiating policies that create structured pathways for youth representation in governmental bodies and institutions can help bridge the gap between governance and young citizens. These policies should include: regular consultations with the youth, especially at the local level, improving the functioning of youth advisory councils and local youth councils to discuss policies, programs, and initiatives affecting young people, as well as immediate creation of such councils in areas where they aren't yet formed.
- *Promoting digital participation:* While all three governments recognize the increased importance of digital developments in recent years, they have done very little to utilize them to increase youth participation. This problem can be addressed in two steps: first, by creating digital platforms that will act both as a medium between the young citizens and the government, providing additional space for consulting with youth beyond the official advisory bodies and councils, as well as info boards that will act as all-encompassing newsletters for all recent plans and initiatives by the government regarding youth; and second, developing a national digital literacy curriculum and training programs targeting schools which will guide the pupils into the new era of digital participation.
- *Increased presence of young officials are elected positions:* We must see a higher number of officials under 30 in public offices, especially in institutions that are directly involved in creating and enacting youth policies.
- *Strengthen Civic Education:* Incorporate comprehensive civic education into school curricula, emphasising critical thinking, active citizenship, and democratic values. This can cultivate a culture

of engagement and encourage youth to participate meaningfully in civic activities. An extra step the Ministries for Education can take is to increase collaboration with civic organisations that promote the aforementioned values, and then promote participation in those organisations to the students.

4.2. To Civil Society

- *Empower Youth Organizations and those working with Youth:* Civil society organisations should play an active role in empowering youth through programs that provide skills, knowledge, and platforms for civic engagement. Strengthening these organisations can create avenues for young people to voice their concerns and actively participate. The action plan to address such an outcome should be investing in and strengthening present resources to support the capacity-building of youth organisations and initiatives.
- *Leverage Digital Platforms:* Utilise digital tools and platforms to facilitate accessible and inclusive youth participation. Create online spaces where young individuals can discuss issues, share ideas, and contribute to policy discussions. Provide training opportunities for young individuals on how to make use of the platforms and the information online. Organise workshops and webinars to educate young individuals on using digital tools effectively. Furthermore, ensure the digital platform is designed to be inclusive, accommodating those with disabilities and those from low-tech environments. Provide alternative formats for content, such as audio versions and simplified language translations.
- *Greater focus on hard-to-reach youth:* One of the most disadvantaged groups when it comes to youth participation in all three countries are the young people living in rural areas and those who have more limited access to organisations that promote political and civic participation. A greater focus in the future, especially when considering carrying out activities with open calls to young people, is to set aside certain quotas for youth from rural areas and parts of the country that weren't as involved in the organisation's activities in the past.
- *Promote Youth-Led Initiatives:* Encourage the development of initiatives that are led by young individuals themselves. Provide mentorship and resources to support their projects, enabling them to drive positive change within their communities. Establish mentorship programs connecting experienced professionals with young individuals to guide them in developing and executing their initiatives.
- *Amplify Youth Voices:* Advocate for media platforms to amplify youth voices and stories, shedding light on their concerns and achievements. This can help combat stereotypes and raise awareness about the significance of youth participation. Collaborate with media outlets to create dedicated segments or platforms that focus on youth-related issues, giving young individuals a voice in mainstream media. Institute awards that recognize outstanding young individuals who have made significant contributions to their communities. Highlight their stories through media channels.

5. Conclusions

This policy paper presents an exploration of youth participation and engagement within the contexts of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia while aiming to serve as a call for transformative action to bridge the gap between the aspirations of young individuals and the corridors of decision-making power.

It underscores a collective commitment to enhancing youth engagement, highlighting the desire for inclusivity, challenges in reaching marginalised groups, and the need for trust-building mechanisms. While acknowledging the potential of technology and digital platforms for meaningful participation, it emphasises the importance of scrutinising these platforms for inclusivity. Finally, the paper identifies concerns and opportunities within existing institutional and legal frameworks, emphasising the urgent need for a more inclusive and informed governance approach to bridge the gap between young people's aspirations and decision-making mechanisms.

The research design where the paper is based includes and reveals stakeholder perspectives and emphasises the potential for cooperation between youth organisations, governmental bodies, and civil society to drive policy reform through evidence-based advocacy and long-term sustainability. It recommends that key factors for fostering meaningful youth engagement include ensuring access to accurate information, cultivating trust, advocating through evidence-based approaches, and establishing sustainable mechanisms.

Governments and policymakers must assess the openness and adequacy of their institutional support and resources to facilitate meaningful youth participation. Additionally, they should diversify their mechanisms and programs to align with the interests and concerns of the youth demographic. On the flip side, young individuals and youth organisations ought to engage more extensively in capacity-building initiatives, awareness campaigns, and direct consultations. They should actively drive initiatives and advocate for funds allocated towards bolstering youth participation in decision-making.

The path to creating an environment where young individuals actively shape their nations' future is challenging yet exciting. This policy paper invites governments, stakeholders, and youth to join this transformative journey. It aims to turn aspirations into policy, challenges into opportunities, and voices into agents of change. As the paper concludes, it doesn't just end; it passes the torch of change to those prepared to carry it forward into the future.

Note: Access to Annexes by Request

Please note that annexes containing additional data, supplementary information, or detailed documentation have been excluded from this publication for the sake of brevity and clarity. However, we recognize the importance of these materials in providing a comprehensive understanding of the policy paper. Should you wish to access the annexes or require specific details mentioned therein, kindly contact info@scidevcenter.org to request the supplementary documents.

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