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Socio – Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia: Apathy, Optimism or Disappointment?

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For the publisher: Damir Neziri, Country Representative

Author: Martin Galevski

Assistant researcher: Borjan Eftimov

Editors: Damir Neziri, Dona Kosturanova

Telephone polling: Tim Institut

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1 Introduction

The study ‘Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia: Optimism, Apathy or Disappointment?’ is a result of Westminster Foundation for Democracy’s efforts to investigate the current perceptions and positions of youth in the country. The design of the research builds on the known research studies and efforts to explore the positions of this demographic group in the country, takes into account what we already know, and builds upon it into new areas. It is important to have understanding and insight in the perceptions of youth, not only because they constitute a quarter of the population, but also because the future development of the country relies on the knowledge and values of these new generations. Young people in North Macedonia have undoubtedly left their mark on society. Whether through activism, engagement with youth organisations and volunteer work, though protest movements, or even with their emigration from the country, they strongly influence the social development of the country in different ways. That is why with this research effort, we try to provide contemporary insight into the ways young people think right now – about their place in society, their engagement, their outlooks.

We deliberately stepped beyond the ‘traditional’ definition of whom we consider youth and made a study that lets us see beyond what the ‘formally young’ going beyond the age of 29, the last year when one is formally considered “young” and extended that to 35. We considered the ‘extended youthhood’ which occurs when young people stay longer in the educational process, find employment later and remain dependant on their parents for longer.

We determined that the current state of youth participation is low, but youth have optimism and a positive outlook for the future. Most young citizens feel socially excluded, believing institutions do not care about their problems and are reluctant to take action to make their lives. But quite reassuringly, we saw

that the young people that are active show more content with their place in society, an optimistic outlook and likeliness to stay in their home country.

This research was designed and conducted by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in cooperation with Youth Educational Forum. The telephone polling was conducted by TIM Institut. The research analysis was prepared by Martin Galevski with support from Borjan Eftimov. WFD expresses its gratitude to their commitment to this research. We would also like to acknowledge the support from the British Government without which this study would have not been possible.

Research such as this one is important to put the youth on the chart, to foster informed discussions and to create fact-based policies. We hope this publication will find its use for youth groups and institutions alike and hope to see more research work in the area that will help institutions and all stakeholders concerned keep their finger on the pulse of youth.

Damir Neziri
Country Representative
WFD North Macedonia



Dona Kosturanova
Programme Manager
WBDI North Macedonia





2 Key findings from the survey

- Less than a third of young people (31%) think that North Macedonia is moving in the right direction.
- 36% of young people believe that in 5 years from now the country will be a better place for young people to live.
- Only 3% of young people are fully satisfied with their place in society.
- Concerning the EU perspective of the country, 60% of the young people in North Macedonia believe the country will become a member of the EU. 70% of them think it will happen in the next 5 years.
- 80% of young people state that the authorities do not care about them at all or only partially care about them and their needs and problems.
- Young people generally believe they can not impact the way authorities work, with 6 out of 10 young people who believe they cannot have any impact at all.
- 85% of young people have never been consulted by authorities, either on a local or central level.
- Roughly one in five young people (22%) in the country believe that the current government is committed to addressing the problems of youth.
- 71% of young people describe themselves as socially inactive citizens.
- Only 8% of young people have taken steps to solve a particular societal problem.
- 90% of the young people in North Macedonia have never been part of a civic/non-governmental organization or initiative that works on social issues, while only 20% of them can see themselves in the future joining one of the activities of a civic/non-governmental organization or initiatives.
- 7% of young people declared themselves as members of political parties, and an additional 20% as supporters.
- 64% of young people state they always vote on elections. However, every second young citizen does not believe one can influence the situation in the country by voting in elections.
- 71% of the young people in the country think that online activism is more important than offline activism.
- 6 out of 10 young people think that LGBT people should not have a place in politics.
- 35% of young people think that men are better politicians than women.
- 63% of young people think that all political parties are the same.
- 85% of young people think that the country needs a leader with a firm hand.



3 Methodology

Research on young people in North Macedonia has a rather short tradition. Many topics and goals that concern the youth are yet to be explored in detail. Both in the period of Yugoslavia and the 1990s and 2000s studies of youth were by and large at a standstill. It is only in the last decade that signs of improvement are slowly becoming evident. As noted in the Youth Wiki report on youth policies in North Macedonia (2017), the Government has no specific line of funding aimed for supporting research in the field of youth and evidence-based research of youth policies. The state commits to research only when the National Youth Strategy needs to be created as it was the case during the creation of the first National Youth Strategy 2005-2015 when external experts were engaged, and in the case of the preparation of the second National Youth Strategy 2016-2025 when the Institute of Sociological, Political and Juridical Research (see Jakimovski et al. 2014) was requested to provide baseline findings aimed to identify critical points of intervention in the field of youth. In the absence of state-initiated research on youth or youth research centre, the role of conducting research on youth issues is primarily done by youth organizations, other types of civil society organizations, think-tanks and international bodies. Hence, one of the missions of this research is to encourage and expand evidence-based research dedicated to youth, with the potential to serve as a starting point for the development of policies in the area as well as future research.

Existing youth studies in North Macedonia usually target young people within the education process – ‘the students’. Target groups other than students are the focus of only a few studies. In our view, this flags up the need for a broader scope of inclusion. With this situation in mind, our sampling methodology was aimed at achieving a wider coverage and a more diverse pool of responses. The term ‘young people’ in this study, therefore, refers to any person between the age of 15 and 35. This definition is slightly broader and deviates from the definition of youth used within EU documents covering

the age-range between 15 and 30¹, or the one used in the National Strategy for Youth 2016-2025, where reference is made to people between the age of 15 and 29.

It is our view that there are good reasons for any serious investigation of youth participation, particularly in transitional post-socialist countries such as North Macedonia, to take into account the persons in the age bracket between 30 and 35 as an integral part of the analysis of youth. As a World Bank (2003) study notes, what designates as youth depends on the local socio-economic, cultural and sectoral context where the study is situated. In other words, bearing in mind the social, economic and cultural factors, young people in different contexts could be faster or slower to acquire the attributes of adulthood. In the Macedonian context there is evidence that the initiation of, and passage towards, adulthood often comes considerably late – a situation which is connected to the fact that even after the age of 30 many young people: (1) remain largely dependent on the financial and housing resources of their parents, and thus lack economic and personal independence; (2) face long term unemployment or spend extended time in education; (3) lack participation in institutional decision-making processes; and (4) live under prolonged transformation of society.

As far as the definition of youth political participation is concerned, it can be viewed in at least two ways: (1) in a narrow sense which implies engagement in conventional politics via political parties, voting in elections etc.; and (2) in a broad sense, which also refers to involvement in different initiatives which may take the form of civic association, informal activities ranging from signing petitions to various forms of boycott, protest and occupying public spaces, or newer forms of political engagement via social media. In this study, the latter understanding of the term is utilized as it allows us to ask more challenging questions about the types and degree of youth participation.

The study that follows was based on a three-stage process. In the first phase, diligent desk research was conducted to gather studies with a focus on youth in North Macedonia. These studies were used to inform and enrich the mapping of the landscape presented in Section 4. One big challenge during this process was how to assure that the latest developments are being taken into account, particularly when policy discussions were concerned. To

¹ The 15-30 definition is extensively used in official EU documents and analysis. It is worth noting however that the EU Youth Strategy (2010-2018) does not operate with an official definition for the specific period in life when a person is considered to be 'young'. This definition varies from one EU Member State to another and the age to consider differs with time and socio-economic development.

prevent leaving out recent changes, where we felt that there is the need for it, we directly contacted relevant stakeholders to provide us with an update.

The second phase, incorporated a telephone survey composed of 33 questions (and additional 7 socio-demographic questions), organized in 7 themes. The research was designed and conducted in a way to provide nationally representative data for the population in question (youth between the age of 15-35), with the principle of randomness of selection². The findings presented in Section 5 are based on the responses of 1025 respondents who took part in the survey. The collection of survey data was conducted by the research agency TIM Institute, during the period of 23rd and 29th of May 2019.

In the third phase, two focus groups were carried out, one in Skopje and one in Tetovo. The focus groups included young people between the age of 15-35 and were conducted after the telephone survey was completed. The primary use of the focus groups (in Section 5) was to provide additional understanding of the situation in ways which could not be readily provided by our quantitative data. In this respect the focus groups provided an opportunity to contextualise the data gained from the survey, and where possible supplement that data in important ways. Importantly, the rationale for the focus groups was not simply to confirm what we already knew from the telephone survey, but rather to seek additional or even opposing explanations to what we previously found. For example, while the survey explored the extent to which young people vote in elections, the focus groups allowed us to delve into the reasons behind the responses offered.

² Level of confidence of 95%, with a margin of error: $\pm 3.46\%$.

3.1. Limitations of the study

Naturally, there are some limitations to our research that should be taken into account. First, it is worth mentioning that 15-18-year-old respondents were underrepresented compared to other age groups in the survey. Respondents from the Skopje region were also overrepresented compared to respondents from the remaining administrative regions. (see Section 5.1 for more detail)

Second, we are aware of the fact that a larger number of focus groups could have potentially yielded even greater insight on the issues covered in the present study. Notwithstanding this limitation, the two focus groups greatly enriched our understanding of young people's perceptions of several important issues that did not come up in the results of the survey.

In any case, by choosing two different methodological approaches – one quantitative and one qualitative – we think that we were able to capitalize on the respective strengths of each and to compensate somewhat for the weaknesses of either.





4 Mapping the youth situation in North Macedonia: A desktop analysis

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the situation with youth in North Macedonia and to give a perspective on the actors, structures and documents that concern youth. The preparation for writing this section began with an extensive process of a search for literature and relevant data available. In this process, as expected, we faced some challenges with finding relevant documents and sources, or particular information that we were interested in. However, we still believe that it provides an up-to-date assessment and a reasonably close approximation of the field. Where possible, as mentioned earlier, we checked the latest developments on several issues to assure that the information provided is relevant and reliable.

4.1. Historical overview of the situation with youth in North Macedonia

It is useful to begin this study by providing a brief chronological overview of the situation with youth in North Macedonia since the end of the Second World War until the present.

The post-war period of the fifties and sixties in Yugoslavia (which North Macedonia was a part of) is characterized by attempts to position youth as one of the key drivers of economic and social progress. Young people were a privileged societal group and often seen, at least symbolically as ‘the embodiment of progress’ (Ule 2012: 30). This kind of positioning of young people was instrumental for the ideological progress of the concept of socialism, its values and aims. In this context, the image of young people in the Yugoslav period was evidently and undeniably affirmative.

However, the ideologically contaminated treatment of young people exposed many weaknesses and culminated with the initiation of student movements

by the end of the 1960s. These movements appeared more or less at the same time with other student movements across the world and for the first time uncovered the displeasure of youth towards aspects of the socialist system and their position in society.

As a result, during the seventies and eighties the youth were placed under a magnifying glass to ascertain the causes of their discontent, and from an ideological perspective, to protect the project of socialism. In the sphere of politics, the representation of youth was the exclusive domain of the League of Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia, formally envisioned as an independent self-managed form of social participation, though in reality often a source of coerced and compulsory social mobilisation under the tight control of the state (Howard 2003). However, in a less sensitive political areas presenting no imminent danger to the established political order (e.g. sport and cultural clubs), young people had a considerable degree of autonomy (*ibid.*).

When North Macedonia gained independence in 1991, despite the heightened attention to civil society and democratic transformation youth issues did not rank high on the list of priorities of governments. This was in part due to a perceived urgency to address and priorities other 'transitional' issues following the breakdown of Yugoslavia and in part due to a lack of ambition and absence of reform ideas on the side of the state. In this respect, the youth was placed on the margins of political agendas, with virtually no policy development in the area or any comprehensive strategic overview of its place and role in society. Similar to the Yugoslav period, or perhaps even worse, young people were regarded as recipients of policy, rather than equal partners in the process of rebuilding society. In large part due to their experience with youth organizations during the socialist era, a significant portion of young people through the entire decade of the 1990s was reluctant to take part in the few youth organizations available.

In 1997, the enactment of a new law that allowed the Pedagogical Faculty in Skopje to provide teacher training for ethnic Albanians in their mother tongue led to a series of protests by ethnic Macedonian students who demanded an immediate withdrawal of the law, which was seen as unconstitutional and destabilising for the future of the country (Myhrvold 2005). Besides the general expression of discontent with the work of the government at that time, the student protests in 1997 – which still remain one of the largest in the country's recent history – were accompanied by strong nationalistic overtones and slogans often degenerating into pure animosity towards ethnic Albanians, even if that might not have been the initial intention. In contrast to student protests in Serbia that helped galvanize a democratic movement

against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, in North Macedonia, the student protests served primarily, and quite unfortunately, as a source of additional ethnocentrism (Galevski 2015).

At the start of the new millennium, the situation slowly began to change and the first real efforts for establishing a national youth policy took place (Council of Europe 2010). Encouraged by the process of Europeanisation (with North Macedonia becoming an EU candidate country in 2005) and the penetration of international donors more emphasis on youth issues was evident. In 2005, a 10-year National Youth Strategy was adopted for the first time, but with a rather unclear institutional framework and mechanisms for implementation. Even though the plan was that there would be an action plan for each year, a more specific action plan was developed only in 2009. As the strategy mostly existed on paper it did not meet the needs of youth and hence contributed quite marginally to the improvement of the status of young people and their decision-making powers in society.

In the period of ruling by VMRO-DPMNE and its coalition (2006-2016), particularly in the early years, there was a significant wave of optimism and promising signs that young people will be one of the top priorities of their political agenda. However, over time, this commitment took a more populist and declarative character rather than real commitment towards improving the position of youth. The government showed limited commitment to dialogue with youth and youth organizations in the preparation of the Youth Law. In cases when young people were given a certain voice it was mostly to prevent criticism and make it seem (both visually and discursively) as if young people are being rightfully involved, while in reality, they did not influence the substance.

Many youth CSOs and other CSOs in general, particularly those critical of the work of the government, were portrayed as serving the interests of the opposition, foreign foundations, or personal interests. They were the target for investigation and inspection, and criticized ad-hominem by pro-government media smear campaigns and subjected to harsh and disproportionate criticism by high-level state officials. On several occasions, the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski directly threatened to shut down CSOs that received funds from abroad, whom he labelled 'Sorosoids' – a derogatory term derived from the last name of the American billionaire, philanthropist and chairman of the Open Society Foundation, George Soros. In several EU progress reports (e.g. 2015 and 2016) space was given to claims of harassment, intimidation and maltreatment of civil society activists or CSOs.

In November 2014, approximately 2000 university students, organized a large-scale student rally against the announced amendments to the Law on Higher Education (Balkan Insight 2014a). The 'Student Plenum', as the informal movement was called, demanded the government to withdraw its plan to introduce a state-imposed exam before graduation. Despite attempts by authorities to discredit the movement by giving it political connotation, the Student Plenum played an important role in improving the image of youth in the country as it was able to challenge a long-standing view that young people: (1) are passive and do not have the capacity and will to express resistance and discontent against social and political injustice; and (2) are unable to mobilize crowds without a political party standing behind in support.

The government led by VMRO-DPMNE tried to undermine and delegitimize the role of the Student Plenum. This only led to an even greater grievance among the students and the second protest attracted more than 12,000 people – making it one of the largest and most diverse protests in the country's recent history (Balkan Insight 2014b). At this point, it became evident that the protest did not occur simply to rule out the 'state exam' but also to demonstrate a much broader resentment towards the increasingly authoritarian and ignorant behaviour of the government. After two weeks of occupying the premises of the largest and oldest university in Skopje (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University) and growing public support, the movement pushed the government to the wall forcing it to withdraw its proposal for a state exam. In this context, the Student Plenum achieved its goal of preventing harmful changes being made to the Law on Higher Education. The Student Plenum also served as an inspiration and led to the emergence of the University Professors' Plenum and the High School Students' Plenum.

The political situation in the country, and the already fragile social environment for youth, dramatically deteriorated in the period between 2014 and 2016 as the country faced a large-scale wire-tapping scandal. The main opposition party at that time (SDSM) accused the government of running an illegal phone-tapping programme which according to their estimation covered thousands of people, involving journalists, politicians (from the government and the opposition) and other public figures, over a four-year period. Some of these audio recordings were obtained by the opposition and were released to the public. The recordings disclosed serious indications that top government officials and their associates were involved in corruption, extortion, interference in the judiciary, and control of the media.

Revolted from the content of the recordings, tens of thousands of protesters, many of them young people, took part in a number of protests in the capital Skopje and other parts of the country, demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and his government. During the course of anti-government protests led by the informal civic movement dubbed the 'Colourful Revolution' several individual young activists were fined and taken to court following what the government claimed to be civil disobedience during the protests. Given the events described above, most reform efforts (not just those connected to youth issues) from 2014 through 2017 came to a standstill.

The SDSM coalition-led government, particularly at the beginning of the term, showed more openness and transparency. As noted in the 2018 EU progress report, 'the harsh rhetoric, pressure and targeted investigations have receded' (European Commission 2018: 2). It initially also showed political will and interest in tackling issues concerning the situation of youth. It introduced a 'Youth Guarantee' project to assist the employment of youth, it adopted a new Comprehensive Education Strategy 2018-2025, a new Law on Higher Education, and it restarted the drafting of the Youth Law (i.e. Law on Youth Participation and Organising), to name a few. The results of these initiatives, however, are still modest.

At the moment, it seems that part of the challenge for this government, much like previous ones, would be to show a continuous and sustained effort necessary to guarantee a successful implementation of these processes. Otherwise, there is a risk of these initiatives becoming simply superficial reforms, rather than activities that can make a real difference for young people and their lives. Experiences from the past show that after some time governments often lose the momentum to tackle youth issues, or simply forget about them, which should be avoided at all costs. As Korunovska-Srbijanko et al. (2011: 7) note, a reoccurring dilemma in North Macedonia is whether young people 'serve merely as ornaments to the documents adopted by the government in order to fulfil the needs of the international community and are they only on the priority list of each party in election campaigns, only to be forgotten by the institutions and the government once political offices have been secured?'

Since early 2017, finding a resolution to the name dispute with Greece took considerable institutional effort at the highest level, and to some extent expectedly, placed other reform priorities, including those concerning youth, waiting in the background. What this shows is that there is still much to be done to strengthen the capacity of public institutions to tackle several

strategic priorities at once. Nevertheless, ending the dispute with Greece is a promising sign for the future of the country and is expected to bring North Macedonia closer to the doors of the European Union.

As part of the requirement to join the EU, North Macedonia is assessed in 33 areas of the *Acquis Communautaire*, including the area of youth (covered in the Education and Culture Chapter 26 of the *acquis*). Even though the areas of education, training, youth and culture are primarily the competence of the Member States, candidate countries are expected to have legal, financial and necessary implementing capacity in place to ensure sound management in these fields. In this respect, each progress report on Macedonia commissioned by the EU briefly reports on the level of adaptation in these areas (including youth-related issues). However, the key focus in the screening process has so far been on assessing the country's capacity to fulfil political and economic criteria, such as the rule of law, fighting corruption, human rights protection and the protection of minorities, public administration reform, freedom of media, movement of goods and monetary policy. This implies that youth policy, as far as the accession process for EU membership is concerned, serves, at least for now, only as a secondary requirement. Nevertheless, some of the political and economic criteria that have been the primary focus on the EU agenda still touch upon issues connected to youth (e.g. youth unemployment, emigration etc.).

In recent years, since the establishment of the Berlin process in 2014, the EU has become highly involved in encouraging youth cooperation in the Western Balkan region, including North Macedonia and five other countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia). A crucial step forward was made during the Western Balkan Summit in Paris in July 2016 with the establishment of a Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) which aims to increase youth visibility, improve youth networking and address the needs of the youth in the region. The fact that the EU strongly supports this process by making available research projects and funding, scholarships, networking and exchange opportunities, and the fact that the RYCO agreement was signed by the six Prime Ministers from the Western Balkan region is indicative of the increasing level of priority given to this issue. Thus, on a political level, RYCO can be seen as a joint effort by the EU and governments in the Western Balkans to 'Europeanize' youth policies and practices in the Western Balkan countries as they progress towards joining the EU.

4.2. Institutional framework: actors and structures

Nationwide, the Government, as an institution with executive power, holds key responsibility in developing policies, reforms and measures dedicated to youth. Alongside the Government, the main authority responsible for youth policy lies in the hands of the Agency for Youth and Sports. During a short period in the past (1998-2000), the Agency had the status of a Ministry, however, this status was later revoked with the process of cutting the number of ministries and was transformed into an Agency (Council of Europe 2010). Even though the Agency is not operating at the same level as a Ministry it does have its independent budget and responsibilities. In the past, influenced by the limited human resources and capacity, there have been proposals to bring the work of the Agency under some of the other ministries (e.g. the Ministry of Education and Science); however, at present, there are no indications of similar ideas being brought to the table.

The Agency has the mandate to coordinate, monitor and evaluate the implementation of the National Youth Strategy, as well as to analyse the youth sector, to encourage financial and other support for the youth sector and provide information for youth about services and programs. In the last few years the Agency, alongside other stakeholders, has made attempts to develop specific action plans for the realization of the priorities envisioned in the National Strategy for Youth. However, as in the past, the action plans have not been well followed once adopted.

Moreover, the Agency has been subjected to criticism that its main, and often sole focus, has been on improving the physical infrastructure for sports which takes a large part of the funds' portion while paying very little attention to the youth sector. In this context, there is a major disproportion in the split between the funds allocated to sports on one hand, and youth on the other. This is clearly evident when one looks at the budget of the Agency. According to the numbers shown in Figure 1 the funding envisioned for youth from the total budget of the Agency is consistently marginal even though it shows some improvement over the last three years.

Figure 1: Budget distribution, Agency for Youth and Sport

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Allocation for Sport	99.4%	99.75%	99.5%	96%	93.5%	95.9%
Allocation for Youth	0.6%	0.25%	0.5%	4%	6.5%	4.1%

The decision-making process at the national level also includes other institutions and ministries such as the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility, the Agency of Employment, the Education Development Bureau etc. The major challenge at the moment is to increase the cross-fertilisation of ideas and projects between different institutions and to increase their cooperation in implementing key policies targeting the youth. Many of the reforms and policies introduced for youth depend on the key person managing an institution, not the institution as a whole. Frequent changes of people on key positions (e.g. Ministry of Education and Science) contribute to stagnation, sustainability and impact of reforms.

In September 2017, as a positive step, the Parliament of North Macedonia has established a Club for Youth Issues and Policies, based on the trend of the European Parliament and EU countries' parliaments. The Club is an informal body composed of younger members of all parliament parties aiming to accomplish the interests of youth in the country, in collaboration with the youth organizations, informal youth groups and youth political wings. At the moment, however, there is no official Parliament Committee in charge of youth issues where initiatives and proposals would be discussed in detail. In March 2018, again as a positive example, the Government held a thematic session dedicated to youth politics, however, there has been no follow up session since then and such practice has not been institutionalized.

At the local level, each municipality is responsible for decision-making concerning youth. However, only a few municipalities have expressed support for youth activities, mainly by supporting youth information centres (e.g. Municipality of Gostivar and Centar Municipality in Skopje) or by offering grants and support for CSOs, including youth organisations (e.g. the city administration of Skopje). Over the last few years (especially between 2015-2017) almost all municipalities formed Local Youth Councils and adopted Local Youth Strategies. However, at present most of these Councils are not in

function and their mandates are expired. In this context, local councils have no real effect and have been simply adopted as part of a ticking-the-boxes exercise.

Currently, there is no official National Youth Umbrella Organisation on a local or national level. This role during consultation processes, such as the preparation of the Youth Law, is usually filled by the National Youth Council of Macedonia and/or the Coalition of Youth Organizations SEGA, even though both are not formally recognized in any law.

The National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM), established in June 2013, is a nation-wide umbrella organization promoting and advocating for the rights of youth, uniting more than 40 youth-led and youth-oriented organizations. The membership of the NYCM is quite diverse. It brings together organizations working at the national and regional level, rural and urban areas, student organizations, and branches of other organizations. It is worth mentioning that NYCM also includes other types of organizations such as youth wings of political parties. This could be seen as a positive step as it holds the potential for youth political leaders to put more pressure on their senior political leaders to understand the importance of the topic as well as to increase the cooperation between political party youth wings and youth organizations. Since 2015, the NYCM is part of the European Youth Forum.

The Coalition of Youth Organisations (SEGA), established in 2004, is a national platform of youth organizations dedicated to lobbying for legislative changes as well as committed to supporting youth activism. The Coalition consists of 12 full and 14 associate member organisations.

4.3. Youth Organizations: current situation and challenges

In this section, we briefly turn to the potential and challenges faced by youth organisations in North Macedonia as well as their role and capacity in youth civic engagement. The primary focus is on youth CSO whose membership and focus are young people and whose activities are related to meeting the needs of young people. While the lack of adequate data makes it difficult to determine the exact number of youth organizations in North Macedonia, there seems to be an increase in the number of such organizations in recent years – even though their number still remains relatively low compared to the total number of registered CSOs which is roughly 6000 (Youth Wiki 2017). A study on youth trends from 2010 conducted by the coalition of youth organisations SEGA mapped 103 youth organisations across the country (Markovska-Spasenovska and Nashokovska 2010). They are mainly Skopjecentric as they are mostly based in the capital Skopje, with fewer youth organisations providing services in other locations. Research conducted by the Youth Educational Forum has identified at least 50 student organisations based in the capital (Youth Educational Forum 2012). To what extent these registered youth organizations are truly active is in the domain of speculations.

The exact number of young people being civically active is not known - at least not from official sources. A reasonable estimate of the proportion of young people engaged in youth organizations or CSOs in general can, however, be provided by looking at several existing studies conducted over the past few years. A global civic engagement report by Gallup (2016) ranked North Macedonia among the ten lowest-ranked countries when it comes to the percentage of citizens volunteering, with only 7% of people doing so. Very similar rates of participation are evident across the entire post-communist bloc of countries in Central and Eastern Europe that evidently lags behind more developed countries in the global north.

In one of the most recent youth study available conducted by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) (see Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2019), 20% of respondents reported being active in a voluntary activity over the last 12 months, while only 3.3% of participants said to have been involved in the work of a youth organization. According to some earlier studies, political parties remain a more attractive avenue for participation among the youth (Taleski et al. 2006; Markovska-Spasenovska and Nashokovska 2010). Considering the study by FES, however, this points to a paradox given that youth expressed the

lowest trust in political institutions and political parties out of all institutions available (see Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2019).

Funding is another major concern for youth organizations in North Macedonia. For financial reasons many of them are unable to maintain yearlong activities and lack a long-term strategic approach to organizational development. A tendency to work on a project-base is evident, which brings into question the continuity and sustainability of youth organizations. Due to budgetary constraints, some typically implement low-or no-cost projects. State institutions at local and national level allocate certain, albeit limited, funds for civil society organizations but not specifically for youth organizations as such. Sponsorships and donations from businesses also play a minor role. Most funding is typically acquired from international donors and funds. In this respect, a reasonable estimate would be that there is a considerable disproportion of funding from foreign sources compared to local ones. Budgeting issues make the employment of full-time employees a major challenge for youth organisations. The number of full-time staff is generally low and most youth organizations in North Macedonia function on a voluntary basis (Jovanov et al. 2013). This situation often diminishes the chances of youth CSO to become more professional in their work and to remain competitive with traditional CSOs in seeking finances from major donors.

Another challenge for youth CSOs is to expand their membership. They are typically small-scale organisations and some of them function more as think-thanks rather than membership-based organisations. This situation often creates a detachment from their constituents. Moreover, it decreases the direct potential of CSOs to genuinely advocate for and represent their constituent's needs. This also creates an atmosphere of distrust or indifference towards civil society organisations as viable forms of association among young people.

In regards to networking, compared to just a few years ago, there appears to be an increase in the connectivity between youth organizations locally, nationally and regionally, helping them to create a shared sense of youth community and a forum for the exchange and ideas in a more structured and systematic way. Youth networks, such as NMSM (on a national level) and RYCO (on a regional level), have created an opportunity for youth organizations to learn from each other and cross-fertilize ideas. Joining forces has also helped youth organisations in becoming an increasingly distinctive subsector of civic society even though the Law on Associations and Foundations does not classify them separately from other types of CSOs. In spite of significant improvements, the youth CSO sector still appears to be rather atomized and fragmented particularly when it comes to representing the interest of youth to local and national authorities responsible for youth.

4.4. Challenges facing youth in North Macedonia

4.4.1. Unemployment

Over the last three decades, unemployment has been one the key (if not the biggest) problems affecting young people in North Macedonia and has been recognized by the European Union as one of the priorities that need to be addressed in the country. In fact, youth unemployment is one of the highest in Europe at 35% and double than the general unemployment rate in the country currently at 17.5% (State Statistical Office 2019). In some municipalities, youth unemployment rates reach up to 80% (Reactor - Research in Action 2012). In such circumstances, it is no surprise that young people identify it as their biggest problem, even high-school students who are not yet active in the labour market (Korunovska-Srbijanko et al. 2011).

The situation becomes even more pressing given the fact that the duration of unemployment for young people is quite long: about 40% of young people in North Macedonia find employment 1-3 years after leaving the education system (Ministry of Education and Science 2016). The consequence of this is a situation where young people depend on their parents, and more than 90% live with them during and long after they finish education. Moreover, as surveys show, almost two-thirds of the youth are concerned that they will not find proper employment after finishing their education (Jakimovski et al. 2014).

In a study by FES, from those young people that work, a third reported working in their professional field, while only one in five reported working very close to their profession (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al. 2019). Besides, the findings from several other studies suggest that a higher education degree is not necessarily increasing the prospects of employment and finding a decent job (Reactor 2012; Bartlett et al. 2016). This is due to the loose connection between universities and the industry, and the weak tradition of vocationally oriented programs in the country. As Bartlett et al. (2016) note, there is a clear vertical and horizontal mismatch between what employers require and what higher education is delivering.

Current evidence from around the world warns that high levels of youth unemployment have far-reaching consequences for the well-being of young people and increases the risk of unemployment later in life (Mroz and Savage

2006; MacDonald 2011). Moreover, it can lead to social apathy and political isolation, it can increase inequality and extend the gap between the rich and the poor, and is associated with higher emigration rates and loss of valuable human capital particularly among the highly qualified youth (ILO 2013). Scientific studies also underline the psychological impact and mental consequences of failure to encourage and support young people in finding a job and improving their work skills (Bjarnason and Sigurdardottir 2003). Most relevant in the context of our study is the positive link that research shows between political participation and periods of employment (i.e. extended periods of unemployment lead to a reduced willingness for political participation) (Banks and Ullah 1987; Bay and Blekesaune 2002). Additionally, it is worth emphasizing that youth unemployment does not only reduce motives for civic engagement but also increases scepticism and negative views about the social order (Schoon and Cheng 2011).

What is evident in the North Macedonian context is that even though the youth are recognised as a particularly vulnerable group across various strategic documents, employment measures targeting young people fail to make a significant impact on their situation. What makes things worse is that politics, and political parties, are having a significant influence on who gets hired. As Gjuzelov (2012) notes, becoming a member of a political party is seen as an attractive goal for many people, not simply because of their interest to engage in politics, but also because of a long-standing practice of political parties to serve as major employment agencies in the public administration. It is a well-known fact that party members, loyalists and supporters are given preference when it comes to employment, which is often evident even in the public employment advertisements, which are drafted to correspond to the qualifications of an already chosen candidate. A recent study on youth unemployment in Macedonia shows that the majority of participants expressed a belief that party loyalty is the safest and fastest path to their desired job, primarily (but not just) in the public sector (Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2016).

Interestingly, and contrary to trends in Western Europe, young people in North Macedonia prefer getting employed in the public sector (Srbijanko et al. 2011; Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2019) despite the fact that salaries and conditions for work are lower compared to other sectors. The stability that a public sector job offers is likely the main reason for this. Despite their wish to work in the public sector, findings from the FES study point that the sector where the youth are mostly employed is the private sector (61%) (Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2019). This points to a degree of mismatch between where young people would like to be employed and where they actually are employed.

4.4.2. Migration

Another major problem facing North Macedonia is the extent of migration, particularly among youth. A particular challenge for estimating the scale of migration is that no reliable brain-drain statistics are available in the country, in part because the last population census was conducted in 2002. Yet, several international studies and surveys provide valuable insight into the situation. The latest World Bank report on 'Migration and brain-drain in Europe and Central Asia' shows that a quarter of Macedonia's population (approximately 500.000 people) has already left the country (World Bank 2019). According to the same report, the emigration rate of high-skilled workers in Macedonia is one of the highest in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, with almost 40% of people that have migrated having a higher education degree. As of 2017, the report notes that more than a third of the university-educated workforce in Macedonia was living abroad, and that about 70% of people employed in Macedonia's higher education system were planning to emigrate; while 20% of them had already applied for jobs abroad (World Bank 2019).

A related concern is the expressed readiness of young people to emigrate abroad. Multiple surveys consistently warn about the increasingly high readiness of young people to leave the country. For instance, a survey conducted by the Youth Educational Forum, covering a total of 3607 high school students showed that almost half of the respondents (46%) do not see themselves in the country in 10 years' time (see Korunovska-Srbijanko et al. 2011). According to the research findings from a study targeting youth in general, every second young person considers leaving the country (Topuzovska-Latkovicj et al. 2013). This rate is even higher (80%) among the unemployed youth (Topuzovska-Latkovicj et al. 2016). The situation is not much different for young academic staff and young medical doctors in the country. According to a study by Galevski (2014), almost two-thirds (63%) of young academics have considered taking an academic position outside the country, while the same holds true for every second (52.5%) senior academics. According to a statement from the Association of Private Practitioners every year 173 doctors apply for emigration abroad, while 220 doctors graduating from the Faculty of Medicine in Skopje (Association of Private Practitioners *online*). The numbers outlined above serve as an alarming attest of the scale of the problem.

Under these circumstances, it comes with no surprise that North Macedonia has been facing a serious demographic decline and an ageing population. The steady drop in participation rates in primary, secondary and tertiary

education in recent years are providing additional evidence that the problem is becoming even more current. Pressured by these problems, the government has introduced a number of policy documents that regulate migration politics such as the National Strategy for Networking, Cooperation and Reducing the Outflow of Highly Educated and Professional Staff 2013-2020 and the Resolution on Migration Politics 2015-2020. In this respect, Macedonia has a rather clear legal framework for regulating the migration of youth, however, the problem persists with the implementation and adaptation of measures in reality (Janeva et al. 2018). So, it seems that strategic documents alone are unlikely to fix the problem especially having in mind the political and policy-making culture in the country where documents of this sort usually remain a theoretical exercise and wishful thinking.

Migration trends in the country are likely connected with the increasing number of higher education graduates over the last few years. As over qualification becomes a major obstacle in finding suitable job positions, quite expectedly, many young people are encouraged to leave the country to realize their personal and professional ambitions. As Bassey (1992: 10) warns in the international literature: 'When young people drop off the education production line and cannot find work at all, or work which meets their abilities and expectations, then we are only creating frustration with perhaps disturbing social consequences'.

Even though the exact cost of youth migration in the country is hard to assess it is quite evident that if the trend of youth migration continues what is currently invested in young people through education and other means will result as a substantial waste. A recent study in North Macedonia conducted by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy provides valuable insight into the situation. Based on their approximative methodology, the results obtained show that the total education costs of people who leave North Macedonia in one year, depending on the educational structure, vary from 116 million to 433 million euros (Westminster Foundation 2019). Due to the inability to prevent annual emigration, the potential annual gross added value loss is measured around 333 million euros, which is around 3.1% of the 2018 GDP (*ibid.*). According to the same study, every work-able person who leaves North Macedonia takes approximately €15,850 of some potential future GDP with them.

4.4.3. Education and Youth

The quality of education in North Macedonia at all levels is a major challenge and substantial improvements seem necessary. According to the 2015 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the country ranks fourth from the bottom of the list among the 72 participating countries. The results show that North Macedonia did significantly worse between the year 2000 when it first participated and 2015 in each of the tested subject areas (mathematics, science, reading). Specifically, 70% of students performed below the basic proficiency in mathematics. Moreover, the percentage of students performing below basic proficiency level in science was three times the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. The study also showed that two-thirds of 15-year-olds in North Macedonia are functionally illiterate when it comes to reading. Finally, the study indicated that the education system is failing to provide adequate support to the poor and students in rural areas: namely, students in urban areas performed much better than students in rural ones, and students who belong to the top income group performed the equivalent of slightly more than two school years over students who belong to the bottom income group. The country participated in the PISA assessment for the third time in 2018, but results are not available yet.

The situation within higher education is also worrying. In the last two decades, the system has drastically expanded and the number of institutions has risen from just two until 2000 to nineteen in 2019. The abrupt wave of expansion has unarguably made the quality of education drop quite significantly. Problems at the lower levels of education have added more 'insult to injury'. High school graduates are coming less and less prepared which often pushes universities to drop their standards. Procedures connected to quality assurance are either non-existent or inadequate for the 21st century. A Progress Report (2017: 73) commissioned by the European Union notes that 'education in the country remains a high-risk sector for corruption and political influence, especially in higher education'. As Zhivkovikj (2016: 11) notes, 'the absence of a strategy to tackle this problem both at a national and university level is rather obvious'. Initiatives and provisions - such as the introduction of a Student Ombudsman, various ethics committees and codes of conduct, offices and hotlines to report corruption - have proved to be unsuccessful. The lack of commitment to tackling this issue

seriously affects the quality of education on offer and creates reputational harm for the higher education sector as a whole.

Currently, North Macedonia is still waiting to see one of its institutions making its spot to one of the major international rankings such as Times Higher Education or the Jiao Tao Shanghai Ranking. There are a number of structural reasons for this situation. The key issue appears to be the marginal research output of Macedonian universities, which accounts for the vast bulk of scoring in almost all global rankings. The fact that Macedonian higher education is short of a considerable portion of the money and international talent that can push universities up the rankings is another limitation. Investment in research and innovation is quite low at 0.44% of GDP (cf. Dolenec et al. 2014), and almost entirely constituted by public investment. Although the National Innovation Strategy from 2012 sets a rather ambitious target of 1.8% GDP investment in research by 2020, with the current investment levels there is certainly no room for optimism that the target will be achieved as planned. The problem with insufficient research funding has been noted in the 2012 EU Progress Report where it is stated that despite some progress as regards legislative developments, 'financial resources are limited and the capacities of the research facilities remain weak' (European Commission 2012: 59). The disappointingly low financial capacity for research is predicted as 'an important factor driving brain-drain' in the country (Dolenec et al. 2014: 79).

There is ample evidence that schooling in North Macedonia frequently fails to empower and cause a high degree of social engagement on the part of youth. The core content of the curriculum does not provide students with the competencies required to engage in public life or serve as an inspiration to do so. For instance, in the textbooks for the subject of Citizen education (offered in 8th and 9th grade at primary school and in 4th year at vocational schools) many questionable definitions have appeared explaining the role of the government, the acceptable forms of citizen participation, tolerance towards different views and attitudes, the role of citizens in democracy, etc. For this reason, the Bureau for the Development of Education has initiated a revision process of the problematic textbooks and is currently preparing a new concept for civic education.

Moreover, learning is primarily focused on factual knowledge and does not foster the development of critical thinking. As reported in a study by the Youth Educational Forum two-thirds of high-school students reported that they do not have classes in which they are required to follow certain political events (Korunovska-Srbijakno et al. 2011). Besides, almost half of the students (46,3%) have never given a presentation, participated in a debate,

visited a public institution, nor have they written a letter to an institution (*ibid.*). This situation is worrying and puts into question how fast and how well young people can integrate into society and public life. In their study on labour markets in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Heinegg et al. (2007: 21) argue that the ‘type of education in the communist countries (with emphases on memorization at the expense of analytical and critical thinking, and perhaps premature specialization if not overspecialization) may be ill-suited for the needs of a market economy’.

4.4.4. Youth engagement in politics

Young people in North Macedonia have the right to vote and be elected from the age of 18. In the current composition of the parliament (2016-2020) two members are below the age of 30 from a total of 120 representatives. The current director of the Agency of Youth and Sports is also below the age of 30. There is no official data to account for the number of young people that have served as candidates either in local and parliament elections, or their representation in other executive bodies on the local and national level. At the moment, there are no special quotas reserved for young candidates. During parliament elections several parties follow a recently established tradition to offer one seat to the president of their youth political wing.

When it comes to the percentage of young people voting recent studies show that more than half of the young population votes regularly (Jakimovski et al. 2014; Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2019). There is not longitudinal data however to show whether the number of young voters is increasing or decreasing over the years. Internationally, the number of young voters seems to be dropping. Some argue that the low level of participation in elections among youth is an indication of their lack of integration in the political system and a clear sign of social capital deficit. However, others claim that the reduced participation in elections by young people is because they are increasingly turning to other forms of political engagement, such as boycotts, non-partisan protests, as well as newer forms of engagement that happen online mostly through social media. In other words, the argument being made is that informal ways of political participation are gradually becoming a substitute for formal modes of engagement. Whether this is the case with youth in North Macedonia remains to be examined.

Young people can become members of a political party from the age of 18. However, informally, some young people choose to participate from an earlier age, which seems to be tolerated (if not even actively encouraged) by political parties. The Law on Political Parties does not provide specific articles that regulate the work of youth political wings. They are mostly regulated by the internal acts of political parties.

While most political parties have some sort of youth wings, they most often are hierarchically inferior and mainly serve to supply 'foot soldiers' during elections, rather than to influence the creation of the political platform of the party, whether as members or supporters. Anecdotally, it is commonly claimed that young members are primarily, and often exclusively, used as a workforce for disseminating flyers, brochures and other material particularly around elections, while having very little input on more substantive issues. During political campaigns and rallies, it is quite evident that young people serve mostly as a visual aid to fill in the background scenery. Quite paradoxically, this often happens while senior politicians talk about the critical need of engaging youth in a more meaningful way.

Recent studies in the country tend to argue that young people in the country are disengaged from politics and display a high level of exclusion from daily political events. One explanation for this can be that political activism is often equated with party activism. This is not an unlikely scenario given that party politics dominate almost all spheres of society. Moreover, the political disengagement of young people appears to be influenced and directly linked with the level of trust that the youth has towards public institutions, rather than just with the claim that they are simply disinterested in public life – as it is frequently argued. The fact that multiple studies (e.g. Markovska-Spasenovska and Nashokovska 2010; Srbijanko-Korunovska et al. 2011; Topuzovska-Latkovicj et al. 2019) show that youth wish to have greater influence in their community is a clear sign of this. However, what is evident is that young people are very cynical towards politics, or perhaps politicians more precisely. In the FES study, 61% of young people believed that politicians do not care about their opinion (Topuzovska-Latkovicj et al. 2019). The reputation that public institutions have among youth is also quite low: almost as a rule, together with political parties they rank on the bottom of the list in surveys on trust and confidence.

How and to what extent the political engagement and level of political cynicism among young people in North Macedonia are influenced by the factor of fear and possible repercussions is not known. However, a survey-based research on the general population from 2014 conducted by the

Macedonian Centre for European Training highlights that an atmosphere of fear and conspiracy dominates political life in the country (Maricikj and Petkovski 2014). According to their survey, three-quarters of all respondents believed that spontaneous protests do not exist and that all protests are instigated and organized by centres of power. Moreover, 63% believed that secret services intercept the communications of people they perceive as opponents. And finally, almost two-thirds (57%) of participants felt that political parties have their ways of finding out how citizens voted, and more than half of respondents (53%) believed that fellow citizens cannot freely express their opinion.





5 Findings from the telephone survey and focus groups

For the purpose of our survey, we used several socio-demographic variables. These included gender, age, ethnicity, place of living, education, employment status, and financial status (as determined by the perceived monthly family budget and self-perceived financial standing in comparison to others).

5.1. Socio-demographic structure of the survey sample

From the total of 1025 respondents, 52.7% were male and 47.3% were female (Figure 2). According to age (Figure 3), the breakdown was the following: 15-18 (8.5%), 19-24 (29.5%), 25-29 (26.4%), 30-35 (35.6%). Based on ethnic origin (Figure 4), 71.6% were ethnic Macedonian, 24.3% were ethnic Albanians, and the remaining 4.1% were respondents from other ethnic groups. Concerning the place of living (Figure 5), 58% of respondents came from urban and 42% from rural areas. As far as the obtained level of education is concerned (Figure 6): 4% of respondents had finished primary education, 7.6% were currently in secondary school, 50.4% had completed secondary school, 16.3% were currently in undergraduate studies, 19.6% had completed undergraduate studies, 0.5% were currently enrolled as graduates or PhD candidates, and 1.6% had completed graduate or PhD studies. Based on the employment status (Figure 7): 9.1% were public sector employees, 39.2% private sector employees, 2.9% self-employed, 1.5% employed, but undeclared (e.g. freelance), 22.4% unemployed and job seeking, 3.4% unemployed but not seeking employment, and 21.4% in the process of education and dependent on others. Based on the monthly budget available (Figure 8), 15.3% of respondents said that it is low and that it is very difficult to subsist, 53.9% said they somehow manage to subsist, but that it is far from comfortable, 29.8% said that their family budget is decent and that they have enough to satisfy their needs, and only 1.1% of the respondents stated that their family budget is excellent and that they have more than enough to satisfy all needs. Finally, concerning their financial status compared to others (Figure 9): 28.6% of respondents said that it is below average, 69.2% said that it is within the average, and 2.2% above the average.

Figure 2: Breakdown of respondents by gender

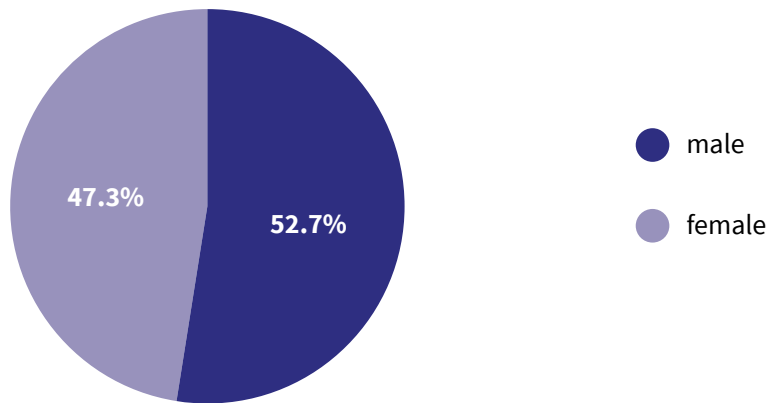


Figure 3: Breakdown of respondents according to age

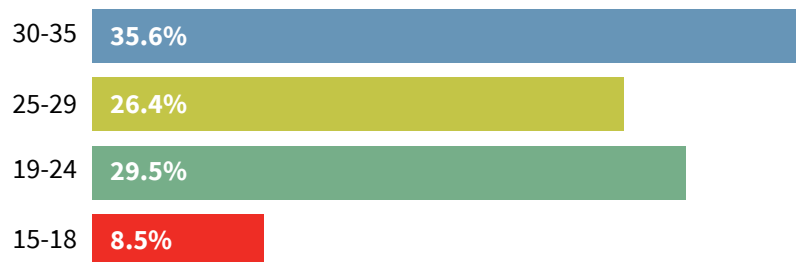
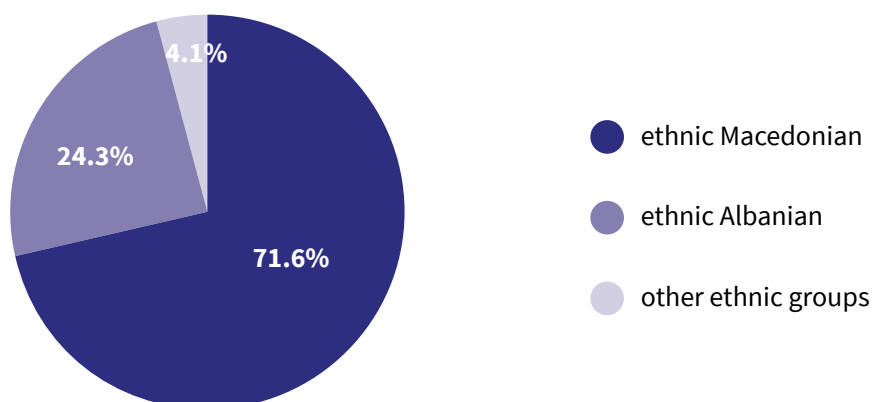


Figure 4: Breakdown of respondents by ethnicity



Based on ethnic origin (Figure 4), 71.6% were ethnic Macedonian, 24.3% were ethnic Albanians, and the remaining 4.1% were respondents from other ethnic groups.

Figure 5: Place of living

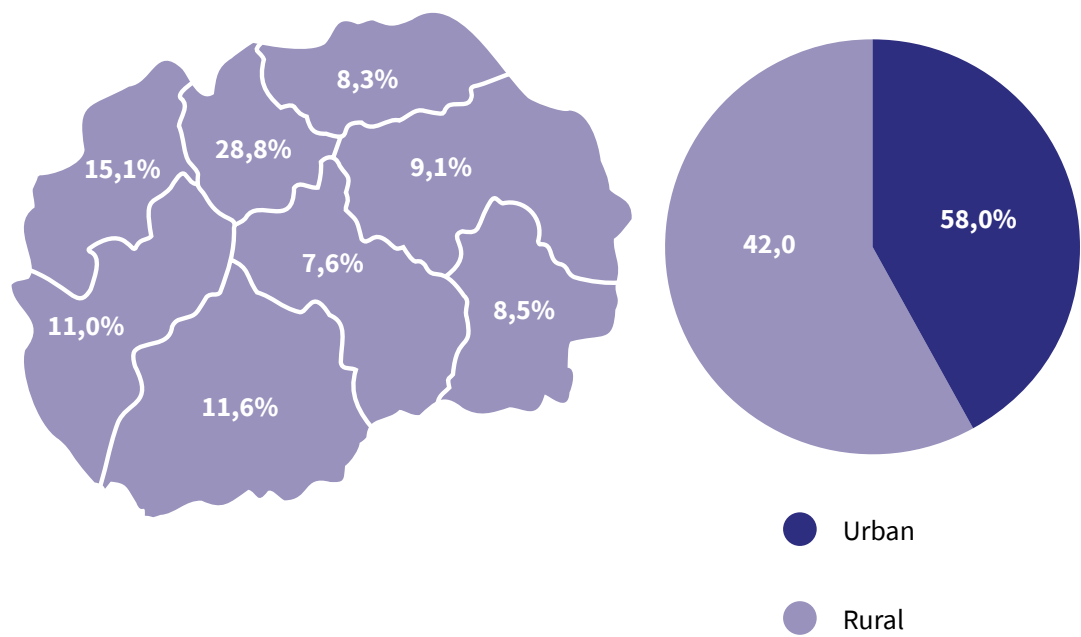


Figure 6: Breakdown of respondents according to obtained level of education

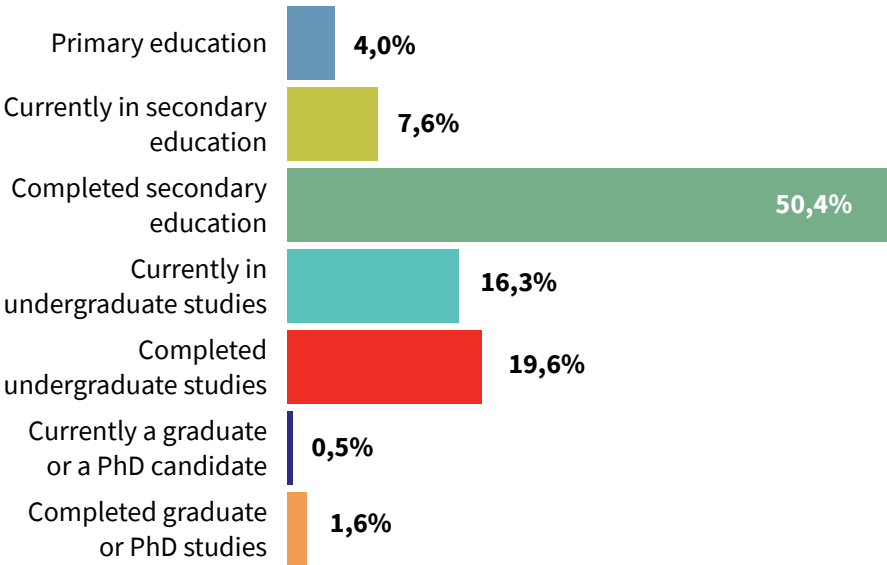


Figure 7: Breakdown of respondents according to employment status

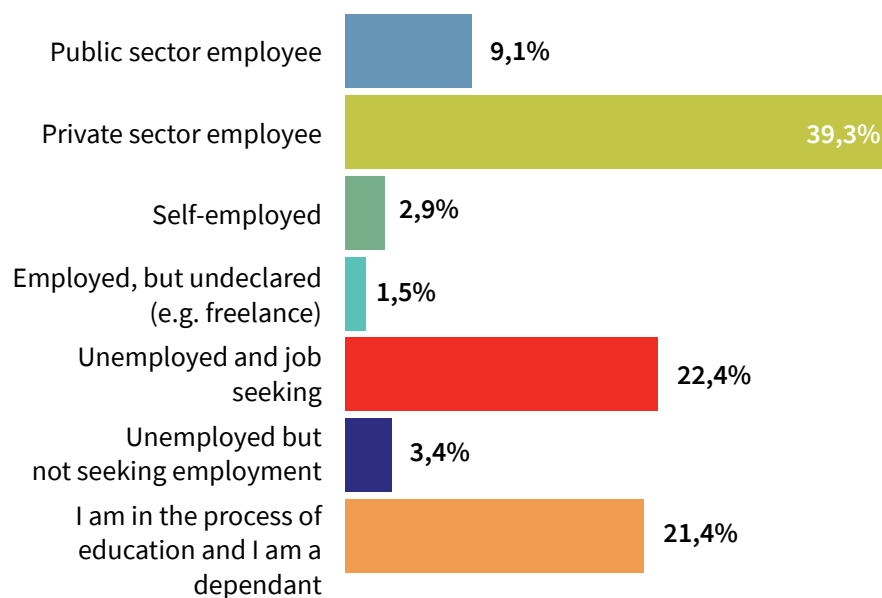


Figure 8: Breakdown of respondents according to monthly budget available

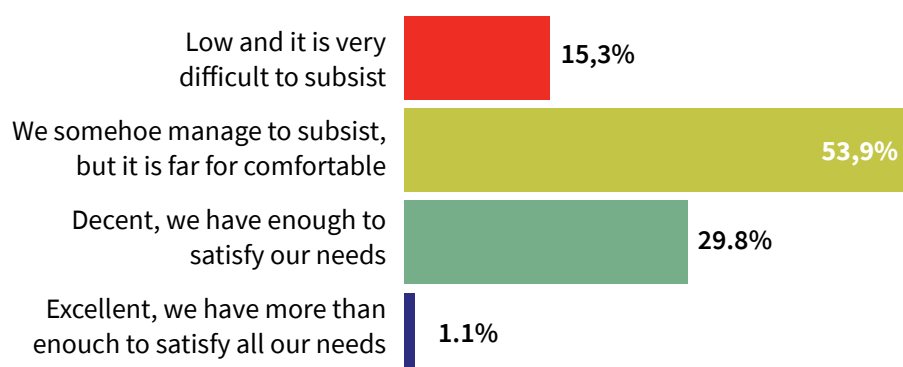
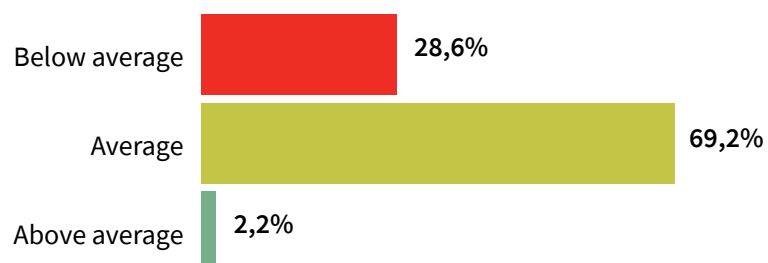


Figure 9: Breakdown of respondents according to financial status

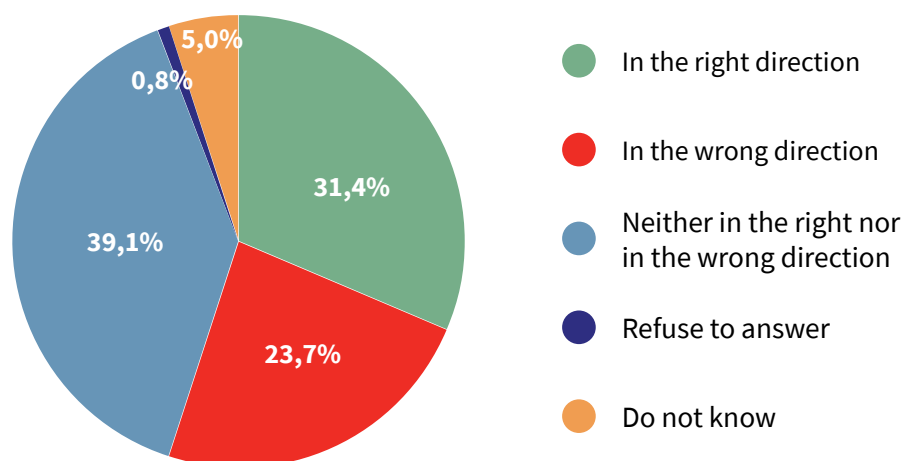


5.2. Youth's perception of social developments in the country and their position in society

The views of young people about social developments in the country were explored with the help of several questions. Our main intention was to measure the general satisfaction of young people with their place in society, as well as their perception of the direction in which the country is moving at the moment.

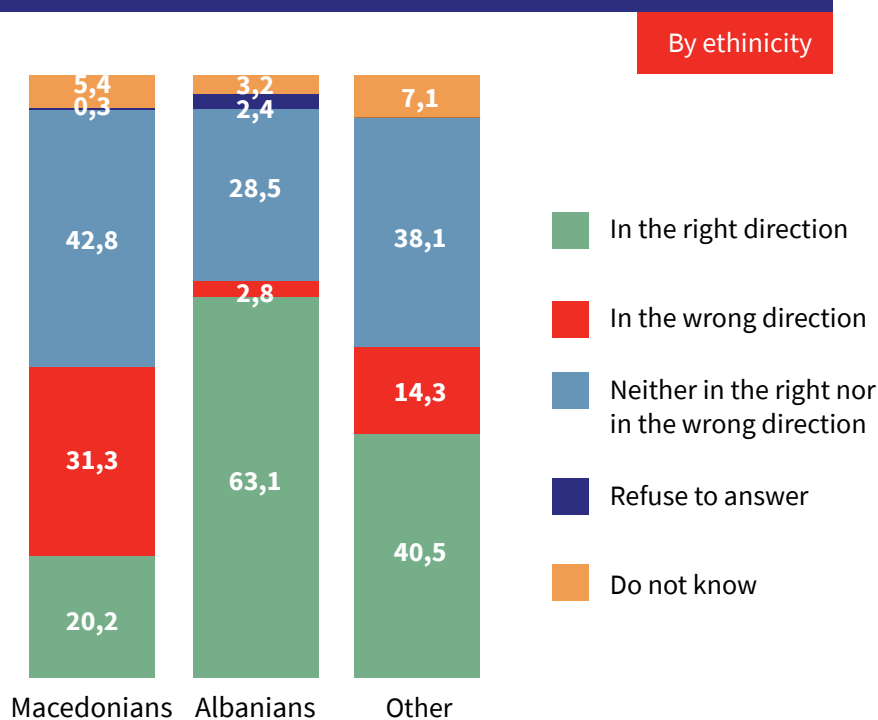
One of the first questions in the survey asked respondents to state '*Generally speaking, are things in the country moving in the right or wrong direction?*'. As presented in Figure 10, young people were fairly divided on this question, with just three out of ten respondents thinking that the country is moving in the right direction. The largest share of respondents (39.1%) stated that the country is at a standstill, meaning that there is neither progress nor backsliding. Roughly one in four young people considered that things are moving in the wrong direction.

Figure 10: Generally speaking, are things in the country moving in the right or wrong direction?



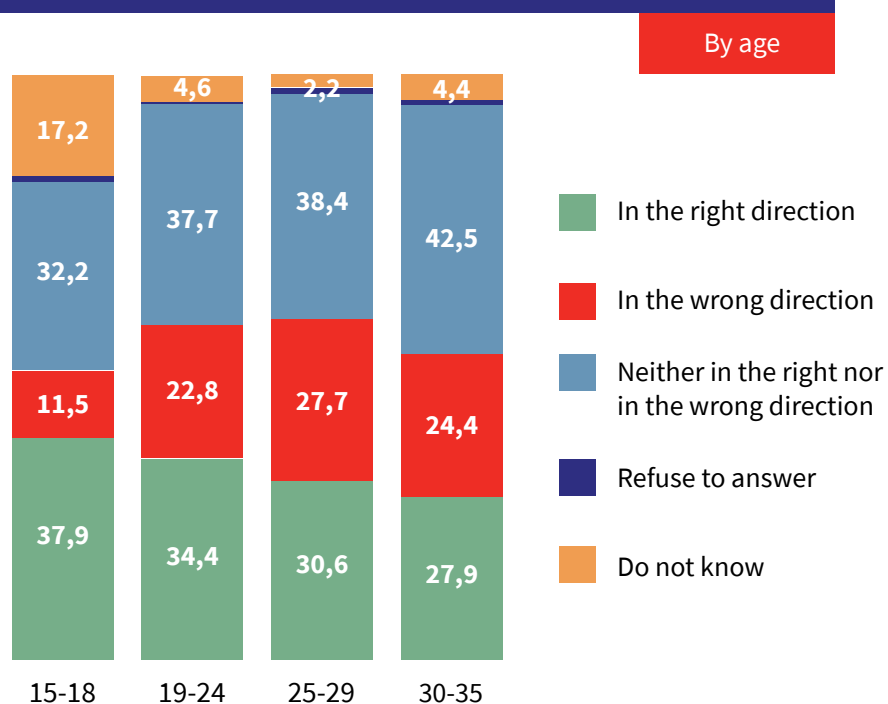
If demographic variables are considered, by far the highest optimism and the lowest scepticism was noted among ethnic Albanians (Figure 11). The optimism was more moderate among other ethnic groups, except for ethnic Macedonians who were much more sceptical and their responses gravitated more towards a standstill situation or even backsliding, rather than optimism. In this respect, our data suggest that ethnic Macedonians are quite disappointed and sceptical about the direction in which the country is moving. The reasons behind such marked differences on ethnic lines are not readily evident from our data.

Figure 11: Generally speaking, are things in the country moving in the right or wrong direction? [%]



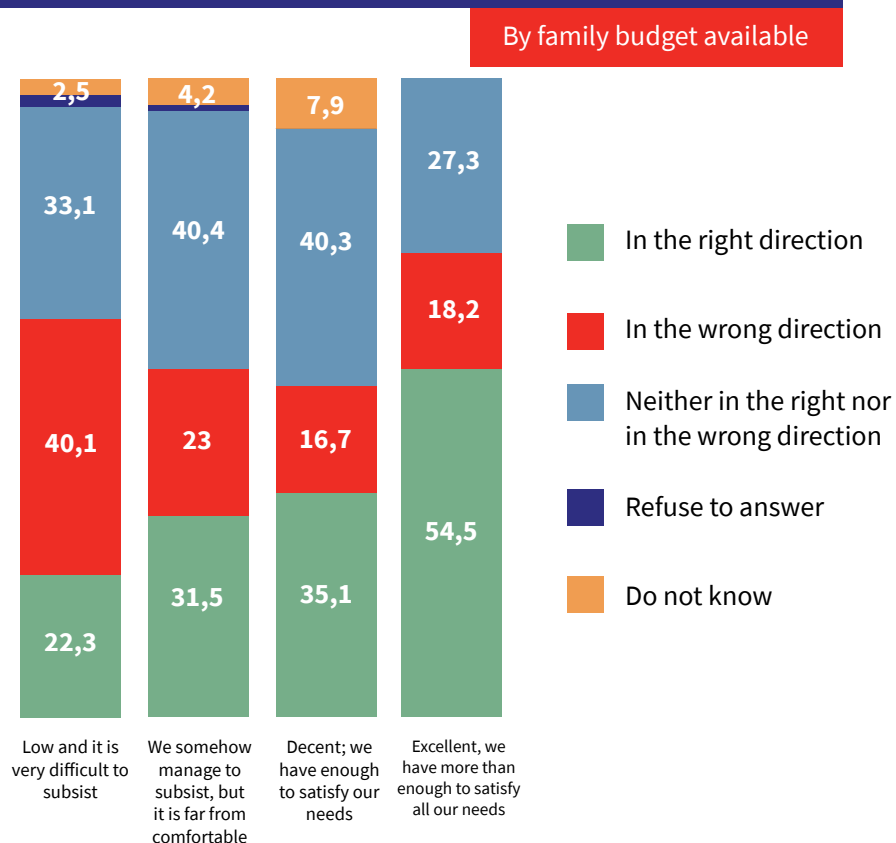
According to age (Figure 12), the level of optimism was the highest among the youngest respondents (15-18-year olds). This is expected if we take into account that people within this age group are yet to face the ‘real world’ and the different barriers young people encounter as they grow older (e.g. finding employment, becoming independent etc.). What can be seen as an encouraging sign is that the youngest share of the youth does not seem to be prematurely disenchanted and still see hope that things can get better.

Figure 12: Generally speaking, are things in the country moving in the right or wrong direction? [%]



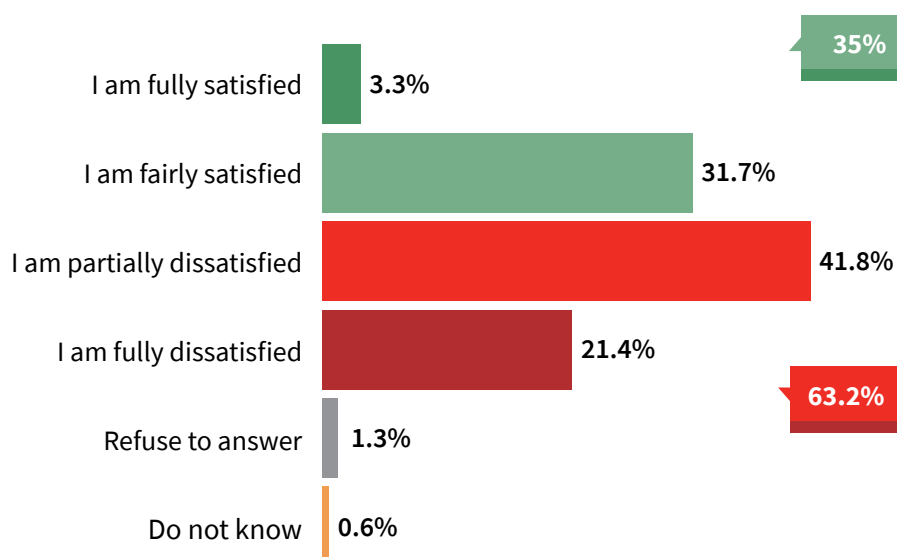
The family budget was strongly related to how young people saw the situation in the country (Figure 13). Respondents who reported having a very lower family budget were roughly two times more convinced that the country is moving in the wrong direction.

Figure 13: Generally speaking, are things in the country moving in the right or wrong direction? [%]



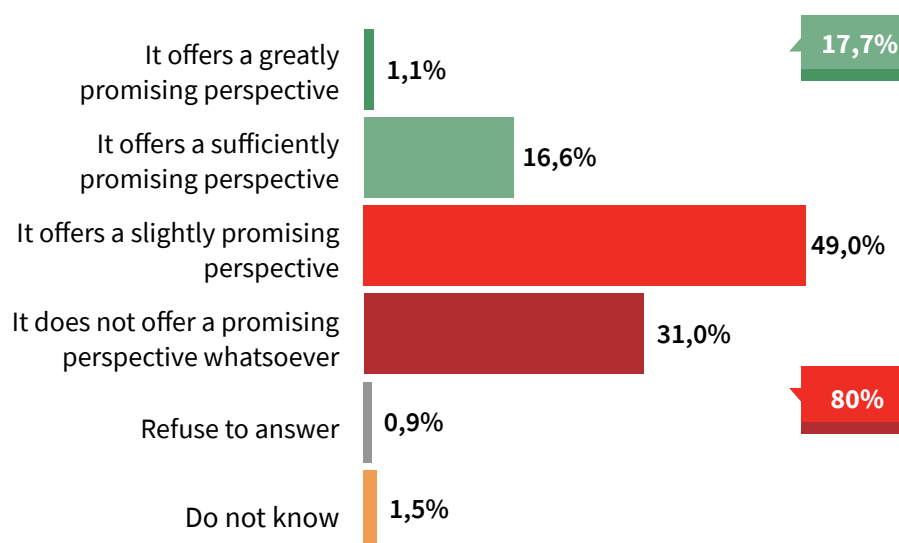
Another related question in this section asked respondents ‘*How satisfied are you personally with your place in society?*’ (Figure 14). Around one-third of the young people feel satisfied with their place in society, but again only 3.3% are fully satisfied. On the other hand, roughly six out of ten young people were fully or partially dissatisfied with their position in society. Similar to the previous question, young people aged 15-18, ethnic Albanians and respondents with a higher family budget were more pleased with their position in society.

Figure 14: How satisfied are you personally with your place in society?



When asked ‘*To what extent does our society offer a promising perspective for the youth?*’ (Figure 15), only 16.6% of young people thought that society offers sufficiently promising perspective and just 1.1% that it offers a great perspective, with no significant differences among different demographic categories. As much as 80% of young people responded that society does not offer a perspective whatsoever or offers a slightly promising perspective

Figure 15: To what extent does our society offer a promising perspective for the youth?



INSIGHTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

A portion of participants in the focus groups believed that with the change of government in 2017 the situation in the country has slightly improved but noted that the changes made are still too little to be felt appropriately. Others were either unconvinced that things have changed substantially or considered that it will take at least a few more years to tell with certainty if things are in fact improving.

As far as the extent to which society offers a perspective for young people, participants felt that there is still much work to be done. The overall impression was that opportunities are not readily available for young people and that it is left up to them to try and find them.

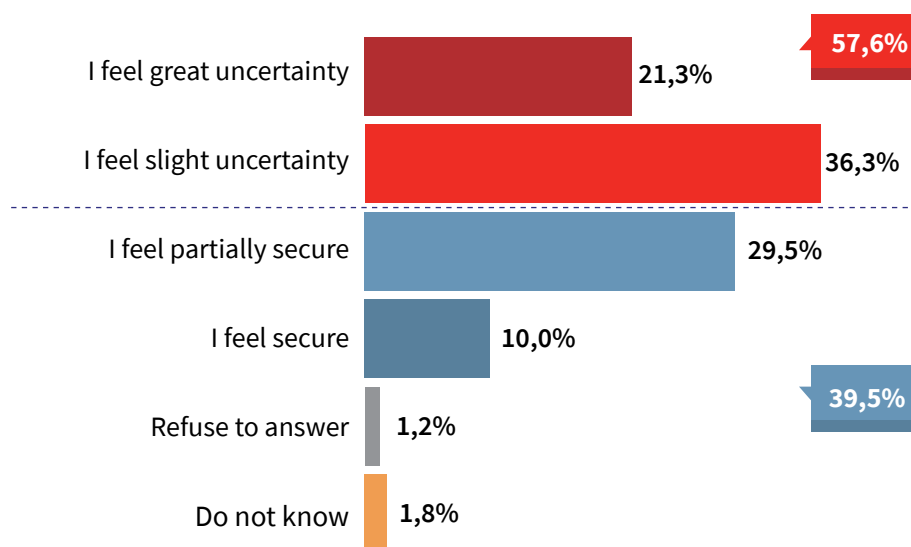
5.3. Outlooks on the future, EU perspective and migration prospects

In regards to young people's outlooks for the future the survey included several questions connected to: how they feel when thinking about their own future and the future of the country; whether they are thinking of leaving the country if such opportunity arises; and finally, how they see the prospects of North Macedonia joining the EU.

Personal future and the future of the country

Connected to young people's individual outlook on the future, respondents were asked to state 'How do you feel when you think about your future in the country?' (Figure 16). The findings show that more than half of the youth feels uncertain about their future: with 21% feeling great uncertainty, and 36.3% feeling some uncertainty. At the same time, 29.5% of respondents said to feel partly certain, and only 10% felt entirely certain about their future in the country.

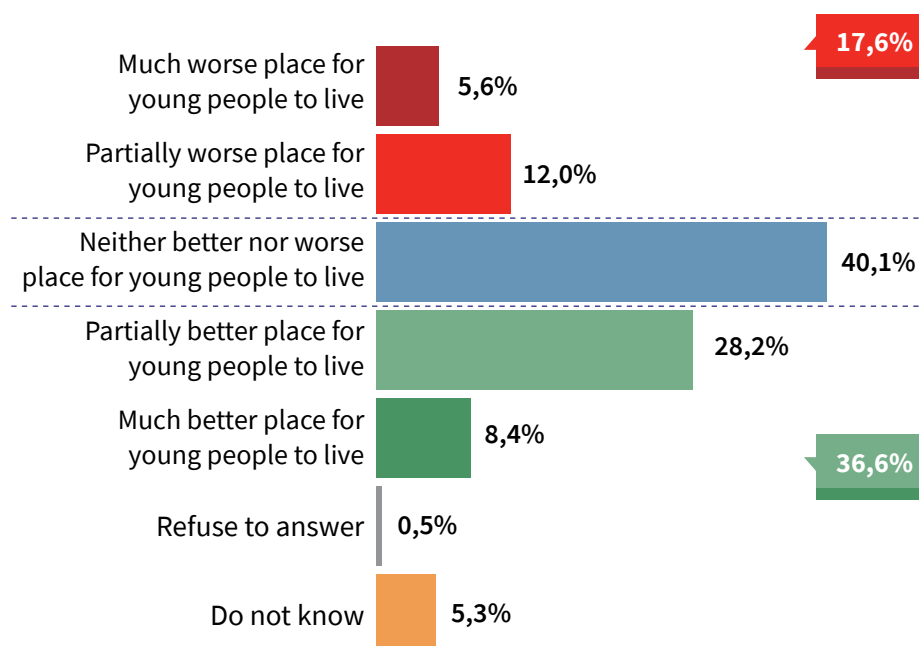
Figure 16: How do you feel when you think about your future in the country?



Age, ethnicity, and family income came out as statistically significant socio-demographic variables linked with the level of uncertainty expressed. In specific, older respondents showed slightly higher levels of uncertainty compared to younger ones – perhaps pointing to the fact that uncertainty begins to show up later in youthhood. The level of uncertainty was the highest among ethnic Macedonians (62.9%), followed by other ethnic groups (54.8%) and lowest among ethnic Albanians (49%). Expectedly, family income figured as an important variable influencing uncertainty. As high as 82% of those who evaluated their family income as very low also reported feeling uncertainty.

Moreover, respondents were asked to state ‘*If the situation in the country will be better, worse or the same for young people in five years’ time*’ (Figure 17). The largest portion of them (40%) believe that the status-quo will remain unchanged, with things neither worsening nor improving. Roughly a third of young people expect that the situation in the country will improve in the future: 28.2% think that it will partially improve and 10% that it will significantly improve. Moreover, an additional 12% feel that it will worsen to some extent and only 5.6% of the youth feels that the situation will be much worse. What the answers provided show is that some young people believe that things in the country will more or less remain the same in the near future, while others tend to show either cautious optimism or slight pessimism.

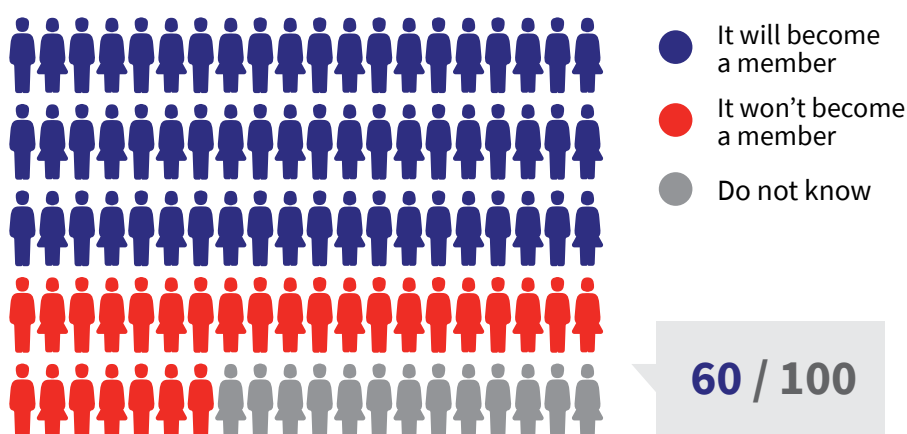
Figure 17: If the situation in the country will be better, worse or the same for young people in five years’ time?



The European perspective of the country

The survey also included two questions concerning the European perspective of the country. The first one asked the respondents the following, *'In your opinion will our country ever become a member of the European Union?'* (Figure 18). According to the results, 60% of the young people believed the country will become a member of the EU, 28% believed that it will not join the EU, and 12% were unsure.

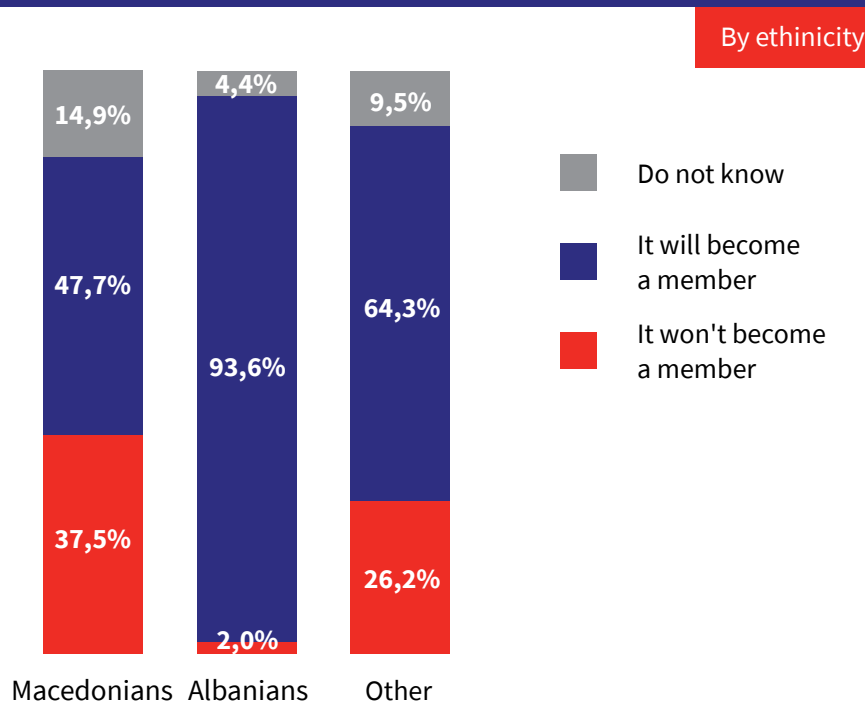
Figure 18: In your opinion will our country ever become a member of the European Union?



From a demographic standpoint, several factors are worth exploring in greater depth regarding this question. If we consider ethnicity (Figure 19), almost all ethnic Albanian respondents (93.6%) expressed optimism that the country will join the EU, while only 2% believed that it will not, and 4.4% were unsure. Among ethnic Macedonians the optimism was by a half lower, with 47.7% believing that the country will join the EU, 37.5% believing that it will not join, and 14.9% being unsure. What factors contribute to this gap between the biggest two ethnic groups in the country in regards to their optimism of joining the EU is unclear from our survey. What we know from previous studies (Damjanovski and Kircher 2019) is that the personal attachment to the idea of EU membership has been historically stronger among ethnic Albanians in the country. Perhaps an additional explanation for the observed

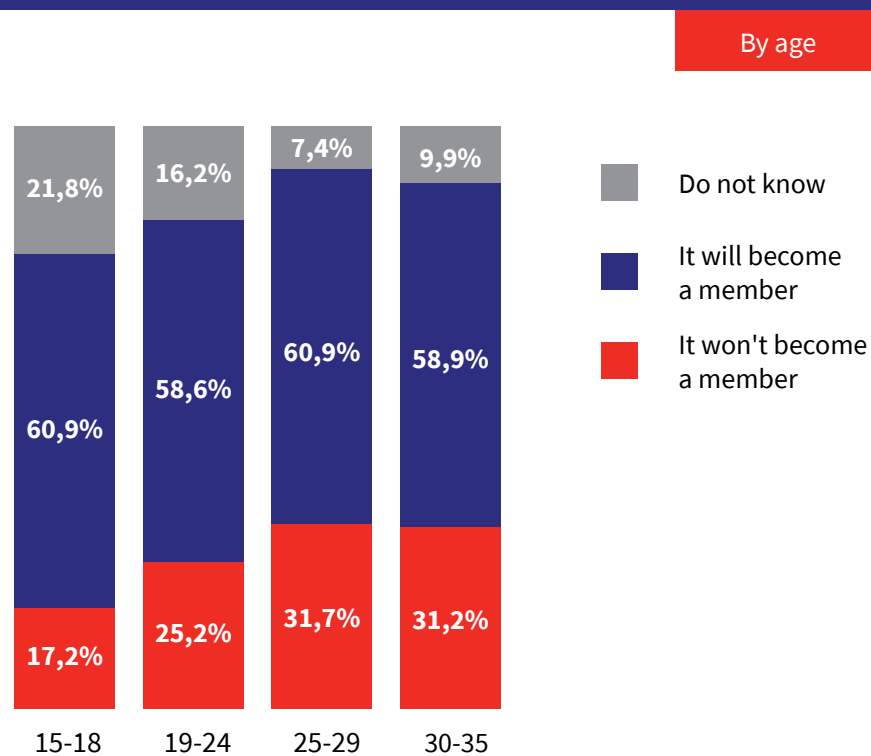
gap between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians can potentially be found in further discussions of the implications of the recent name change of the country into North Macedonia and how this issue may have shaped the attitudes of different ethnic groups.

Figure 19: In your opinion will our country ever become a member of the European Union?



When respondents are divided by age (Figure 20), the results show that across age groups the optimism is very similar and revolves around 60%. However, there is a significant difference based on age when considering the percentages of respondents believing that the country would not join the EU, as well as those that do not know. Quite evidently, the number of those that do not know if North Macedonia is going to join the EU is much higher among younger respondents, particularly those aged 15-18. At the same time, our data suggests that as young people grow older, they become more sceptical about the prospects of joining the EU.

Figure 20: In your opinion will our country ever become a member of the European Union?



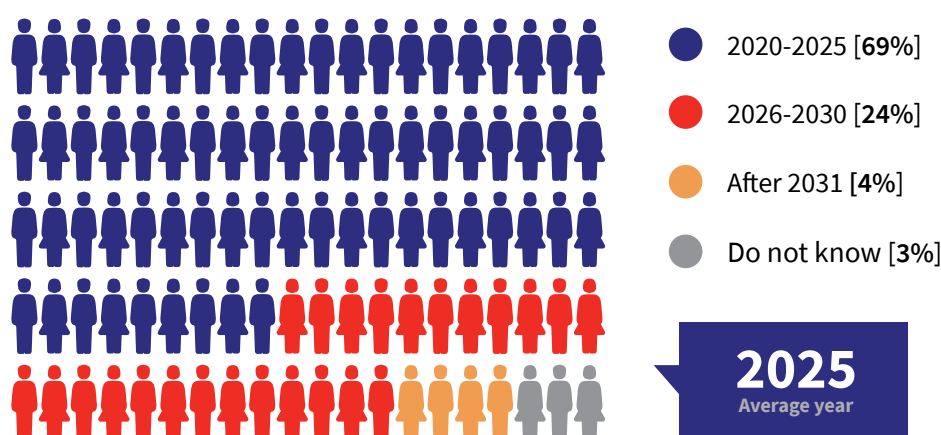
According to gender, female respondents were slightly more optimistic than male respondents (62.7% and 56.7 respectively), however, only a weak statistically significant difference was observed between male and female respondents.

Finally, when responses on this question were cross-tabulated against responses to other questions, it was evident that the belief that the country will become a member of the EU was highly correlated with the level of optimism that young people had around social developments in the country, as well as their family income. Namely, young people who believed that the country is moving in the right direction and those with higher family income were more optimistic about the EU prospects of the country. Optimism was much higher among political party members (82.4%) in comparison to non-party members (52%).

The second EU-related question asked respondents who believed that North Macedonia will become a member of the EU to also '*Indicate the year when this will happen*' (Figure 21). From the pool of respondents (N=610) who believe that the country will join the EU, 69% of them think that it will happen

in the period from 2020 to 2025 (which is 41% of the total population of young people aged between 15-35 in our sample), 24% in the period between 2026 and 2030, 4% not earlier than 2031, and 3% unsure when it will happen.

Figure 21: Indicate the year when you think North Macedonia will join EU



If we look at the findings more closely, there is a substantial portion of young people that can be called ‘extreme optimists’. According to the results, as much as 35% of respondents believed that North Macedonia will become a member of the EU by 2022. Optimism appears to be the highest among respondents in the age bracket 15-19 and steadily decreases with age. Interestingly, while Albanians were much more optimistic about the country’s prospect of getting in the EU, they share the same view as ethnic Macedonians when this is likely to happen.

So how realistic is it for North Macedonia to join the EU by 2025 or even earlier as many respondents hope for? Though not entirely impossible, the chances of completing the accession process with a 2025 target appear rather slim at the moment. In the EU Enlargement Strategy from 2018 the European Commission cautiously states that a 2025 target is ‘extremely ambitious’ and that much remains to be done across the board to align with the EU’s acquis (European Commission 2018b: 2). Although the speed of the accession of any candidate country to the EU depends on its individual progress and efforts, the experience of all countries joining after 2004 confirm that it is a complex and long-term process which usually lasts roughly around a decade from applying for membership to accession. For example, Romania and Bulgaria

submitted their application for membership in 1995 and the EU confirmed the conclusion of accession negotiations with these countries 9 years later in 2004. Croatia – the most recent country from the region that has managed to join the EU – started negotiations in 2005 and completed the process of accession in 2013.

The fact that 2025 came out as an average year assumed by respondents, is an interesting finding from the standpoint that the same year coincides with the stated ambition of the Government. On several occasions, the Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has expressed optimism for the country to end talks for EU accession in 2025. The Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs, Bujar Osmani, has similarly voiced his belief that the country will succeed to wrap up EU accession talks by 2025. At the EU level, while the 2025 enlargement target is regarded with considerable scepticism and reservations by some officials in Brussels and EU governments, the European Commission has repeatedly stated that the date 2025 is still open to all candidate countries, including North Macedonia.

It is important to highlight that the survey was conducted five months before the unsuccessful attempt of EU member states to agree on opening EU accession talks with North Macedonia at the EU summit held in October 2019. Considering the disappointing results for the country at the summit, it would be interesting for further research to see how, and if, the perceptions of young people on the prospects of North Macedonia joining the EU, and when exactly this could happen, have changed and been influenced by the decision.

INSIGHTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

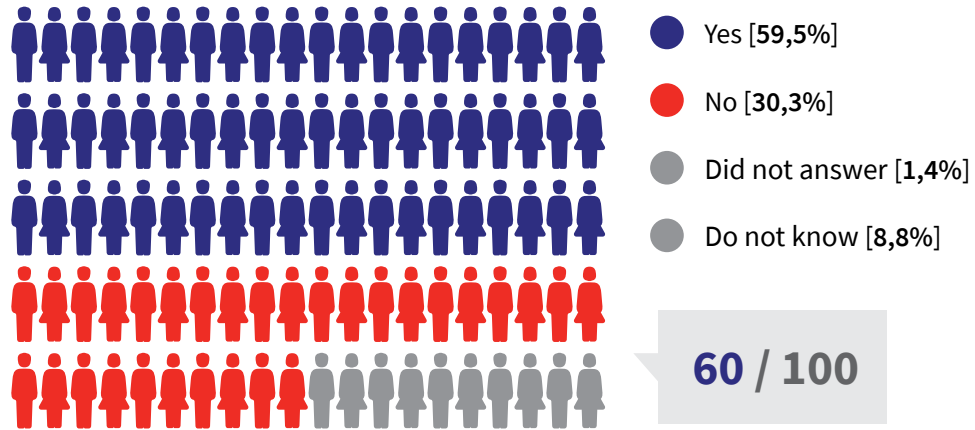
Participants in the focus groups were asked to write down on a piece of paper if they think Macedonia would join the EU, and if their answer was affirmative to state the exact year when they think this would happen. In contrast to our findings from the survey where a large majority of respondents saw 2025 as the most likely date for joining the EU, participants in the focus groups were less optimistic on average. The year 2025 was mentioned by some, however, most participants believed that joining the EU is unlikely to happen before 2030. A common expectation was the accession process will be long and difficult, but only a few participants had information and understanding of what this process entails and how it functions in practice. Participants were nearly unanimous in saying that the eventual

entrance, as well as the rate of progress towards the EU, depends on North Macedonia itself, and how well local authorities will comply with the prerequisites and obligations to the EU. Surprisingly, very few participants discussed the possibility that internal EU politics and the willingness of Member States to accept new entrants can be a major factor influencing the eventual accession.

Migration prospects (intentions of leaving the country)

As presented in Figure 22, nearly two-thirds (59.5%) of the young people in the survey expressed an intention to leave the country. This finding resonates rather consistently with several other youth-focused studies where the percentage also ranges between 50% and 60% (e.g. Korunovska-Srbijanko et al. 2011; Topuzovska-Latkovicj 2019; USAID 2019). While the ‘intent to leave’ has been found to be a strong predictor of actual leaving in scientific literature on migration, the reader should be reminded that this percentage usually drops when respondents are asked a follow up question (which we did not ask) connected to the actual steps that people have made to fulfil this intent. For instance, the FES study concluded that amongst those young people that expressed intentions to move abroad, 43% have not taken any steps towards this goal (Topuzovska-Latkovicj 2019). Nevertheless, we firmly believe that the expressed readiness of nearly two-thirds of young people in our survey to leave the country is pointing to a realistic prospect of a large-scale exodus with potentially severe consequences on the future development of the country.

Figure 22: If you had the opportunity, would you move from the country?



The willingness to migrate was most critical amongst those aged 19-29, those who identified themselves as ethnic Macedonians, and youth with low family income (Figure 23).

Figure 23: If you had the opportunity, would you move from the country?

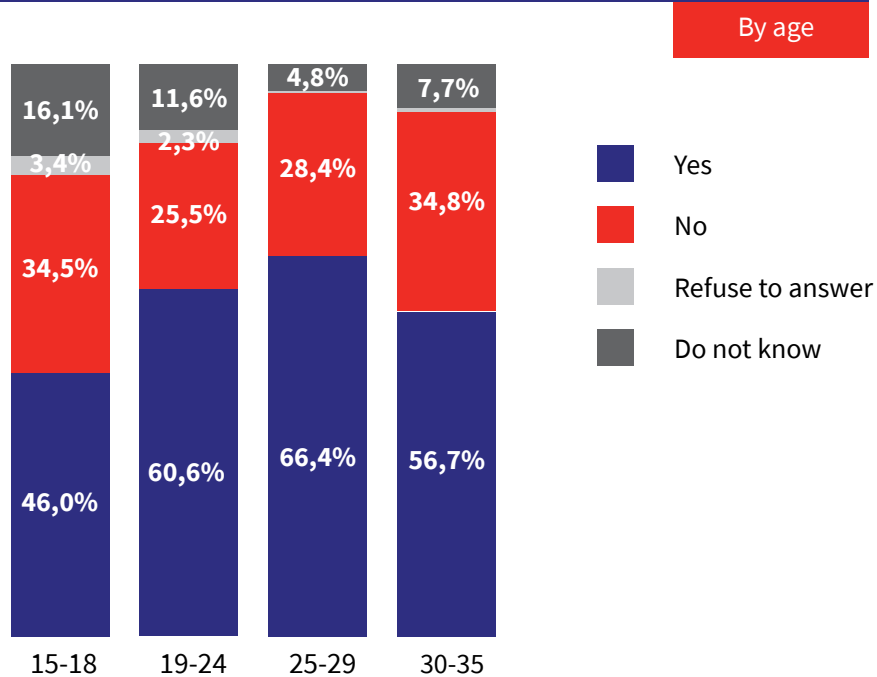


Figure 23: If you had the opportunity, would you move from the country?

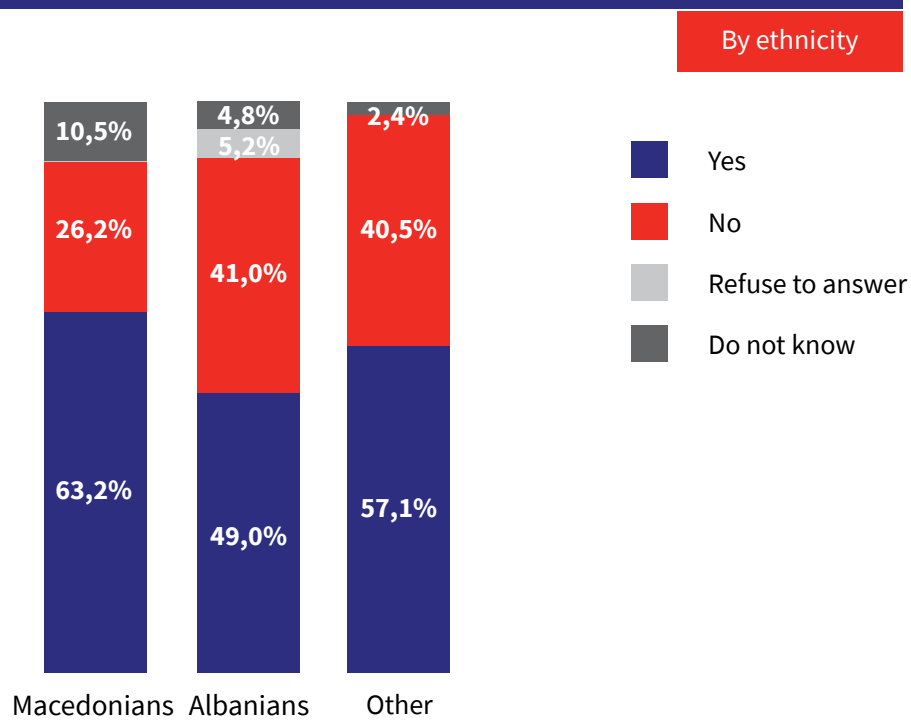
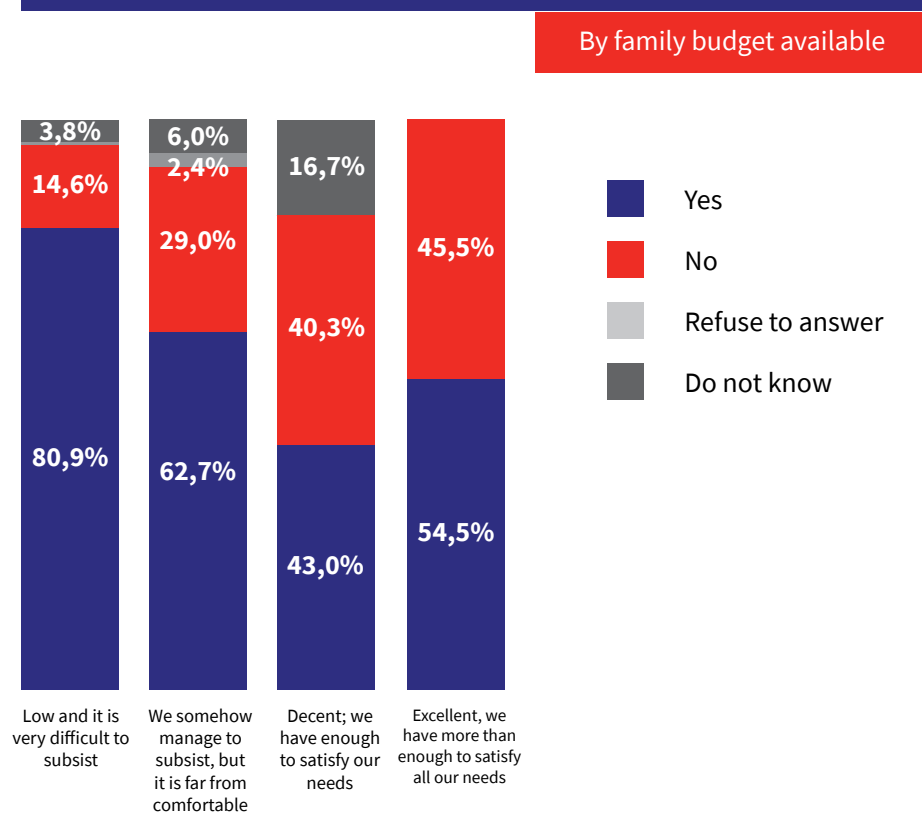
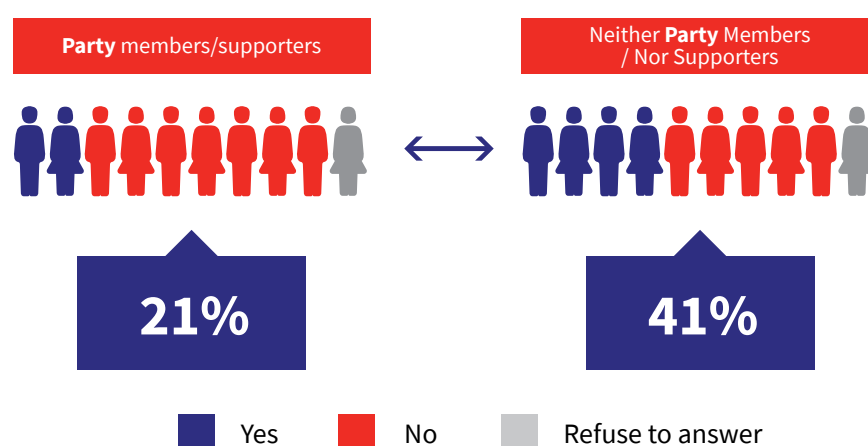


Figure 23: If you had the opportunity, would you move from the country?



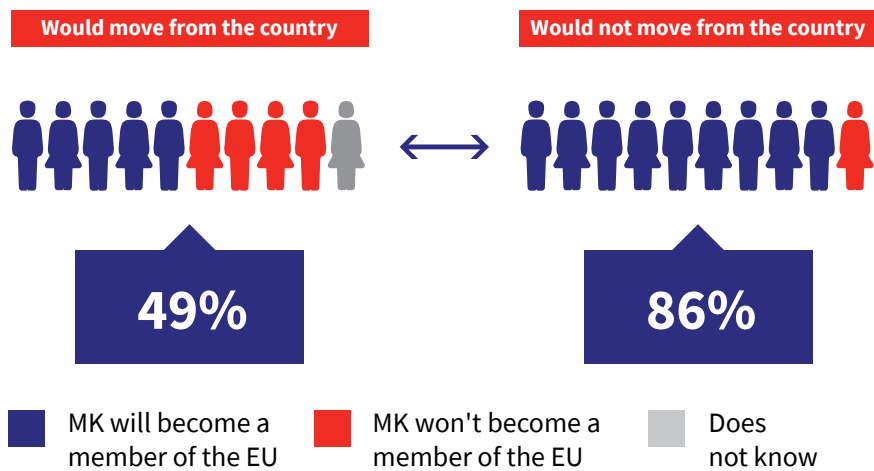
Migration prospects also turned out to be much stronger for young people that were displeased with the opportunities that society offers for them. Interestingly, those respondents that declared themselves as neither party members nor supporters were twice as more willing to move from the country (41%) compared to those that declared themselves as party members or supporters (21%) (Figure 24). One intuitive explanation for such a marked difference is based on the assumption that political party members and supporters enjoy structural and institutional advantages over non-party members and non-supporters.

Figure 24: If you had the opportunity, would you move from the country?



The views of respondents concerning the country's prospects of joining the EU were in strong correlation with the very decision on leaving (Figure 25). Of the respondents who believe that the country would join the EU, 86% do not think about leaving the country, while the share of those who do think of leaving is reduced to 49% among those who believe that the country will join the EU. This finding reinstates the significance of joining the EU as a top priority for the country, and a possible way out that can potentially reduce the willingness for migration amongst the youth in North Macedonia. In other words, our data suggest that it is highly likely that youth brain-drain will increase even further in the near future unless the country can move towards joining the EU.

Figure 25: If you had the opportunity, would you move from the country?



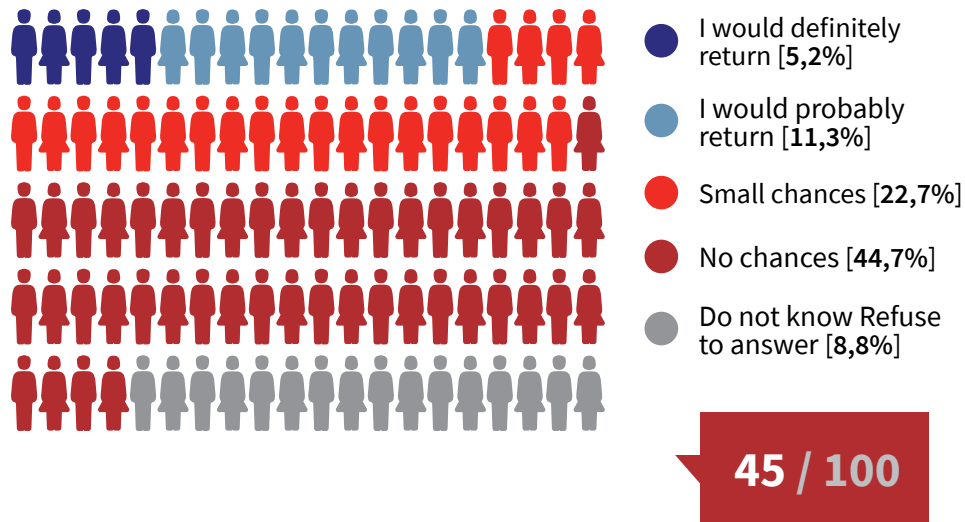
Young people that expressed preparedness to leave the country were the least ready for activism. This seems to suggest that they are not at all willing to invest time and effort in making a difference in society and taking an active part in its sociopolitical life.

Chances of returning

When it comes to the hypothetical chances of returning to Macedonia after moving abroad our survey portrays a rather grim picture (Figure 17). Namely, 44.7% of the young people answered that there are no chances that they would return, while additional 22.8 % said that there are little chances of doing so – amounting together to two-thirds of the respondents (67.4 %). From the remaining one-third, 11.3% said that they would likely come back, while only 5.4% said that they will come back for sure.³

³ The findings presented here relate to those respondents (N=714) who previously stated that they would move out of the country if they had an opportunity.

Figure 26: If you ever decide to leave the country, what are the chances to return later?

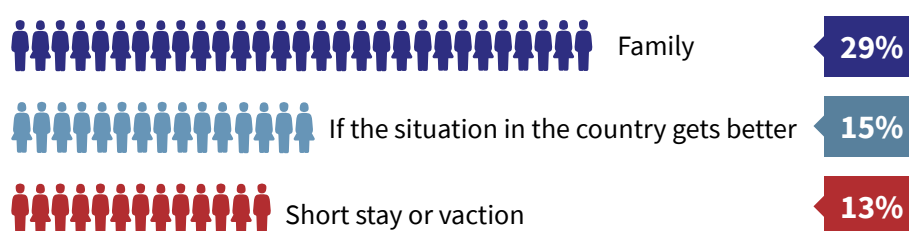


These findings suggest that for a significant share of the youth there are little or no chances of going abroad and coming back. In other words, once young people choose to move abroad this usually means buying a one-way ticket, and potentially meaning that they are lost for good both as economic agents and perhaps, even more importantly, as active agents in society. As suggested earlier, potential returnees are the clear minority, however, it should also be noted that there was a significant portion of the youth that was still undecided if they would return.

In order to understand the reasons that can potentially drive returnees back to the country, we asked one additional question to those respondents who either responded that they would likely or surely return back to North Macedonia and those that did not know if they would return. In specific, respondents were offered a chance for open-ended responses to the following question: *For what reasons would you consider returning to North Macedonia?* (Figure 27). A significant portion of respondents said that they would return for personal reasons, largely connected to their desire to be in close proximity to their family and friends. Others stated that they would come back for nostalgic reasons and love for their country. Some young people said that they would return to North Macedonia but only if several conditions are first met. These conditions were typically connected to the improvement of

the socio-economic and political situation in the country. Surprisingly, very few respondents said that they would return to open their own business. Finally, a portion of respondents framed their answers in a rather interesting fashion which points more towards a preference for a seasonal return (e.g. for vacation periods) rather than a ‘real’ return.

Figure 27: For what reasons would you consider returning to North Macedonia?



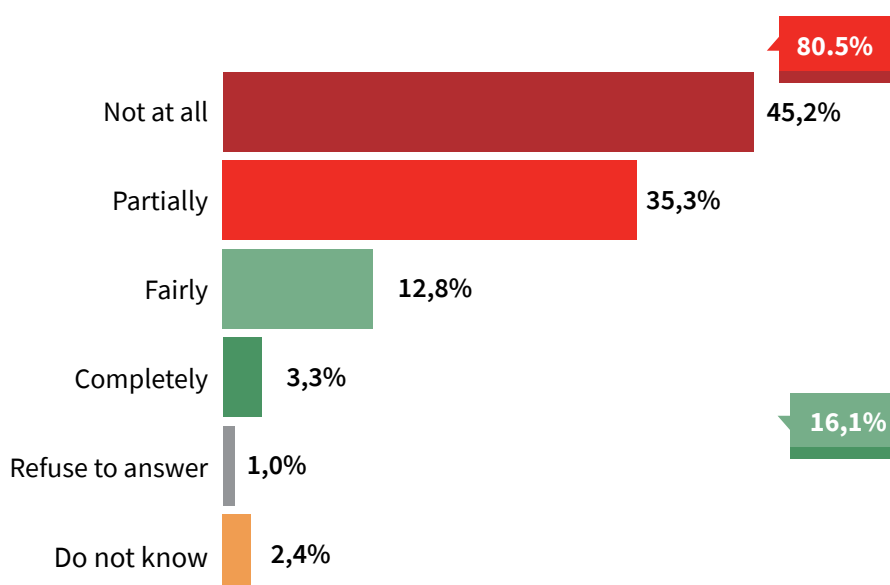
INSIGHTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

In the focus groups, we only briefly touched upon the issue of migration as this is an area covered extensively in another research. The willingness to move abroad was evident amongst most participants and confirmed our survey findings. Frequently cited reasons for doing so were connected to better employment and education prospects as well as the quality of life offered abroad. Feelings of disappointment with the current sociopolitical situation in Macedonia were also mentioned as significant reasons to leave the country.

5.4. Confidence in the work of authorities, personal impact, and participation in decision-making processes

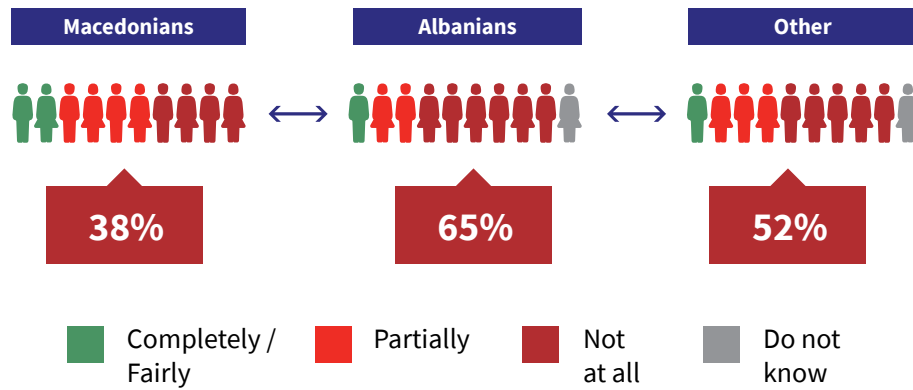
With a view to establishing the extent to which youth issues are being taken care of, respondents were asked to state ‘*To what extent do the authorities care about you and your needs and problems*’ (Figure 28). From all the respondents, 80.5% stated that the authorities do not care about them at all or only partially care about them and their needs and problems. As low as 3.3% of respondents thought that authorities completely care about them.

Figure 28: To what extent do the authorities care about you and your needs and problems?



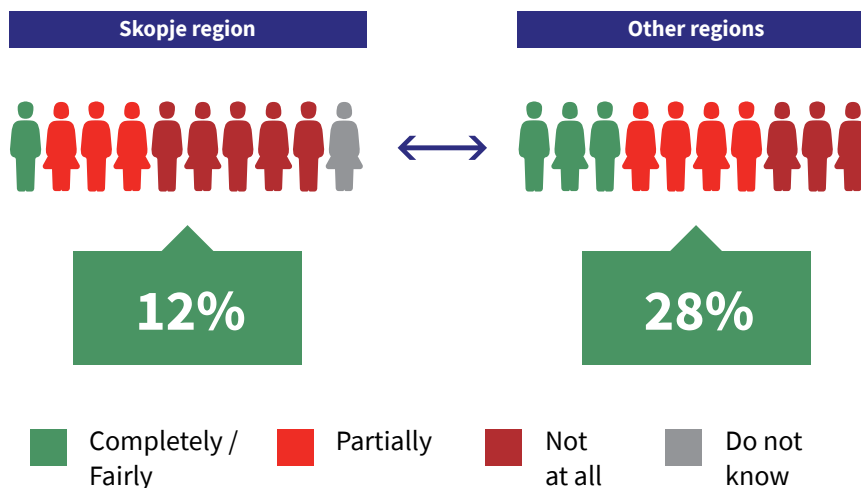
Ethnic Albanians in higher per cent (65%) felt that the authorities do not care about them at all, followed by other ethnicities (52%) and ethnic Macedonians (38%) (Figure 29).

Figure 29: To what extent do the authorities care about you and your needs and problems?



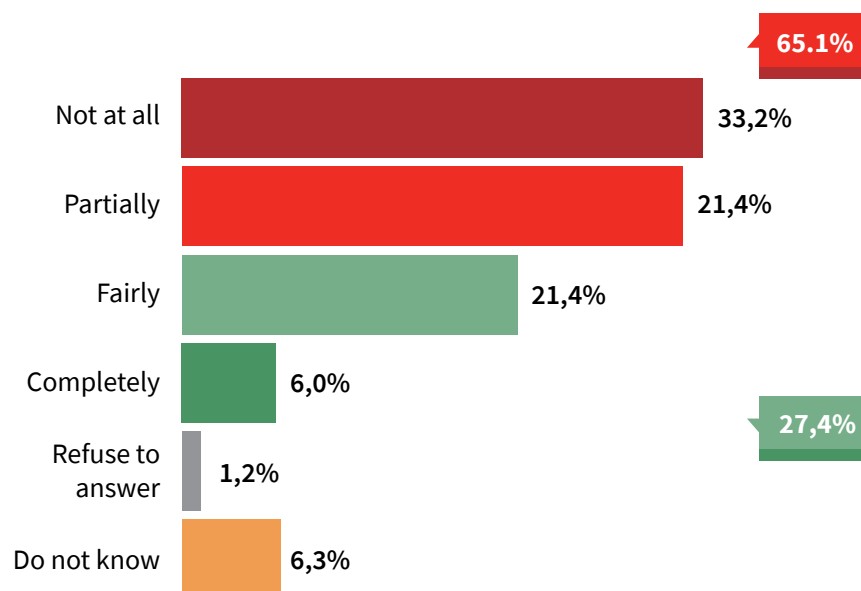
Interestingly, young people from the Skopje region were more displeased with the extent of care by authorities compared to young people from other regions (Figure 30).

Figure 30: To what extent do the authorities care about you and your needs and problems?



When asked ‘To what extent are authorities familiar with your needs and problems as a young person’ (Figure 31), almost two-thirds (65.1%) of the young people responded that the authorities are partially or not familiar at all with the needs and problems of the young people.

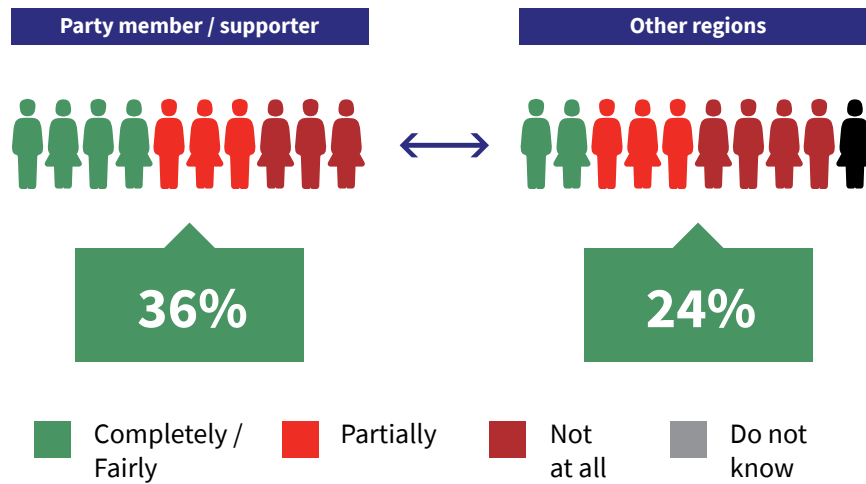
Figure 31: To what extent are authorities familiar with your needs and problems as a young person?



Young people aged 15-18, ethnic Albanians, Turks and Roma, as well as young people with lower socioeconomic status in higher per cent feel that the authorities are not familiar at all with their needs and problems.

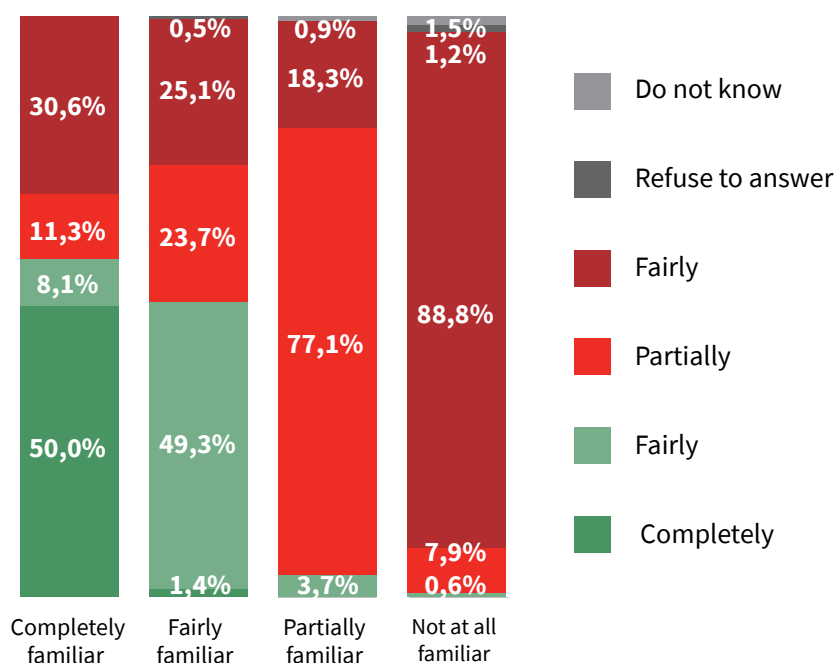
Respondents who were neither members nor supporters of a political party were less likely to state that authorities are completely or fairly familiar with the needs and problems of young people (Figure 32). At the same time, the percentage of those who stated that authorities are not familiar at all was roughly the same for both party members/supporters (31.9%) and non-party members/supporters (34.8%).

Figure 32: To what extent are authorities familiar with your needs and problems as a young person?



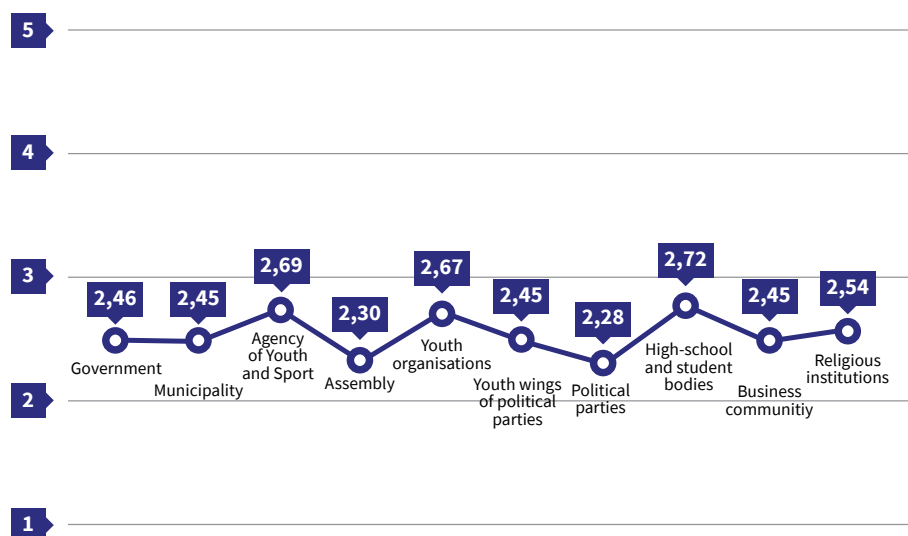
If we consider the cross-tabulation of the previous two questions (Figure 33), an interesting, yet alarming, finding arises that around 41.9% of the young citizens who believe the authorities are completely familiar with their needs and problems, still feel that the authorities do not care about them at all or only partially care about their needs and problems. This suggests that even when young people perceive that authorities are aware of their concerns; they still believe that youth issues suffer from high levels of ignorance and are not being properly addressed.

Figure 33: To what extent are the authorities familiar with your needs and problems as a young person?



In order to measure the confidence that young people have in various stakeholders (i.e. institutions, organizations and other groups) covering youth issues, they were asked ‘On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being unsatisfactory and 5 being excellent to evaluate several stakeholders and the extent to which they work in the interest of the youth’ (Figure 34). From the descriptive findings, it is already visible that young people are very distrusting and cynical towards all types of stakeholders. In general, respondents gave fairly low grades to all stakeholders regarding their work in the interest of the youth, with the average grade across all stakeholders being rather disappointing (2.50). The lowest grade was given for the work of parliament and political parties, while the highest grade was given to high school and student bodies, the agency of youth and sports as well as youth organisations. The fact that there is just 0.50-grade difference from the highest rated to the lowest rated stakeholder does not allow us to reach sound conclusions in interpreting the differences in scores.

Figure 34: On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being unsatisfactory and 5 being excellent, evaluate several stakeholders and the extent to which they work in the interest of the youth



What we noticed, however, is that all of the stakeholders that had ‘Youth’ in their title scored slightly better than those that did not. Having said that, it still comes as a big surprise that high school and student bodies were given the highest grade, especially from the standpoint that multiple studies have shown that such bodies do not exist in practice. For instance, a study on civic engagement among high school students conducted by the Youth Educational Forum in 2012 noted that as much as 70% of students do not know whether their school has a student body and 81.3% have never taken part in student body elections (YEF 2012). Similar findings pointing to the absence of student bodies are reflected in studies focusing on the situation within higher education (see Aleksoski et al. 2014; Zdravkovska and Barlakovski 2016).

Government commitment to the problems of youth

With one of our questions, we wanted to find out how young people felt about what the Government does for the problem of young people. To do so, respondents were asked ‘Do you think that the current government is committed enough to address the problems of the youth?’ (Figure 26). The results show that less than one in four young people (22%) look favourably on the work of the government when it comes to addressing the problems of the youth.

Figure 35: Do you think that the current government is committed enough to address the problems of youth?



When the results are broken down (Figure 36), ethnic Macedonians think that the current government is less committed to addressing the problems of youth compared to ethnic Albanians and other ethnicities. The reported family income was a strong predictor of how the work of the government was perceived. In fact, there was a distinct division: only 7% of respondents that reported having a very low family budget believed that the current government is committed enough to address the problems of youth; whereas 45% of those who reported having an excellent family budget believed that the current government is committed enough to address the problems of youth. According to age (Figure 36), the commitment of the government was most positively perceived amongst non-voters aged 15-18 (32.2%) and most negatively perceived amongst respondents aged 25-29 (19.2%). There were no differences based on gender and place of living.

Figure 36: Do you think that the current government is committed enough to address the problems of youth?

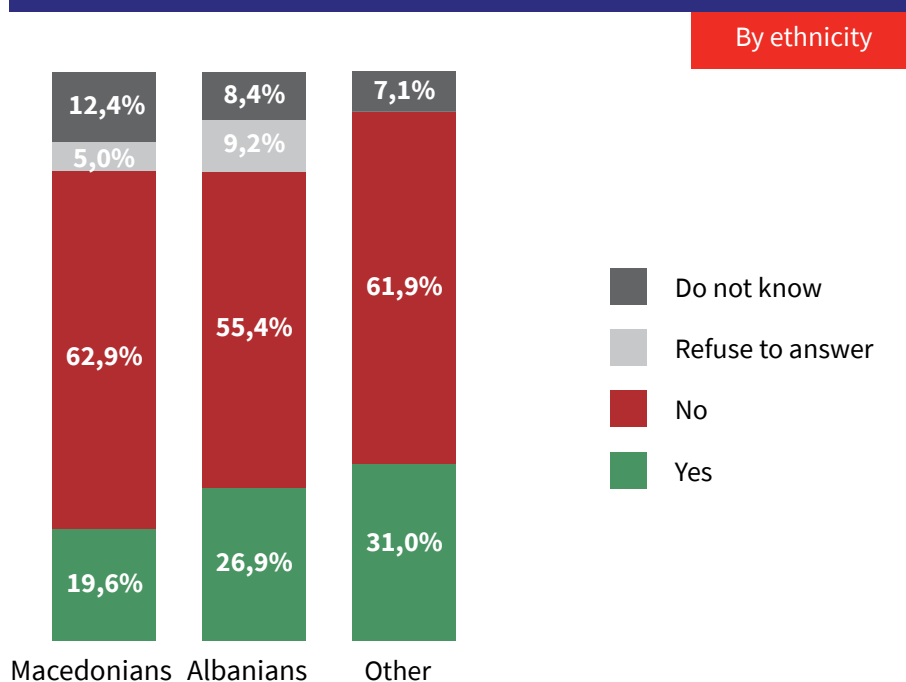


Figure 36: Do you think that the current government is committed enough to address the problems of youth?

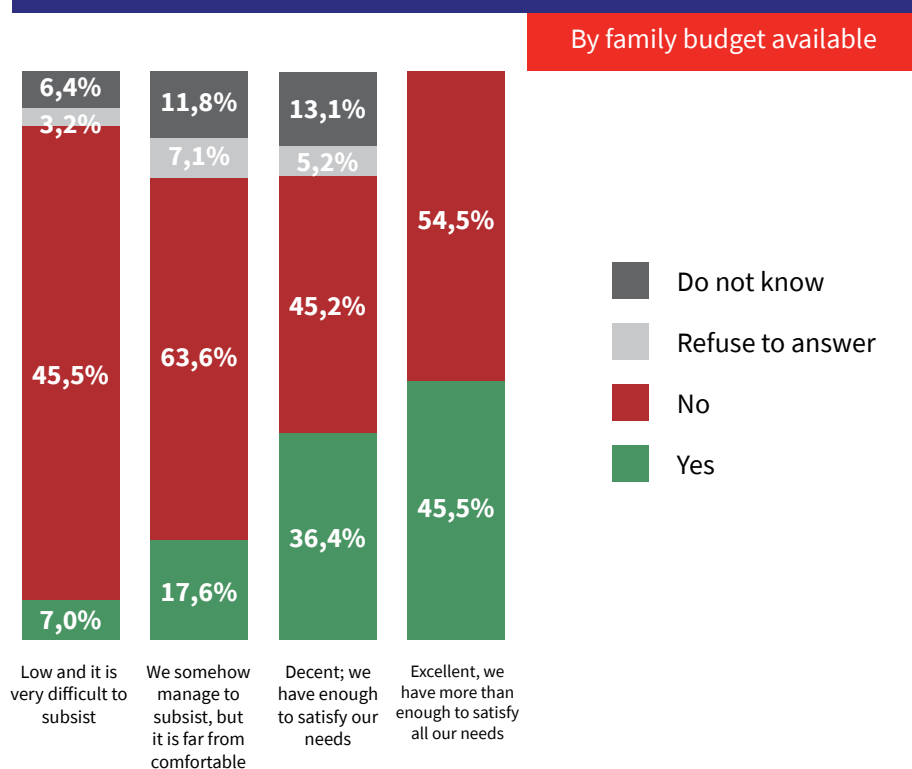
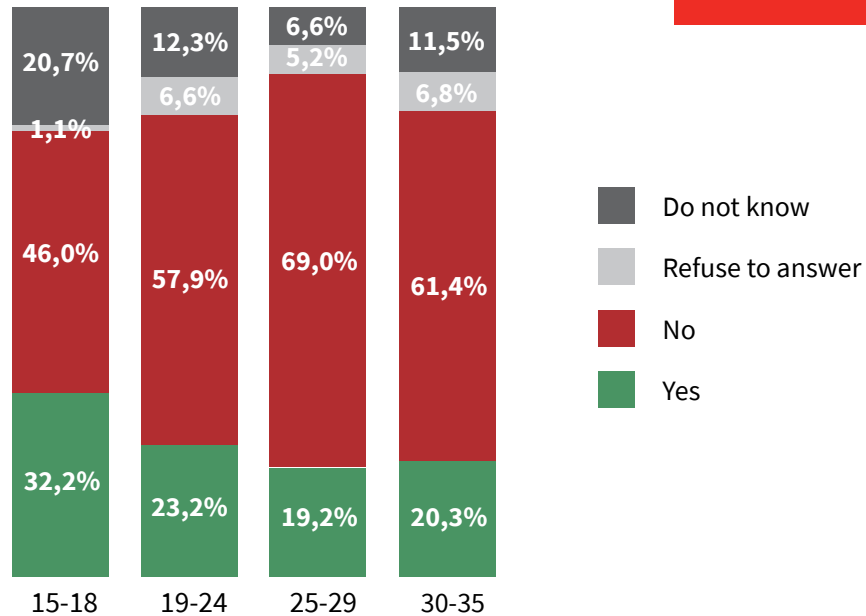
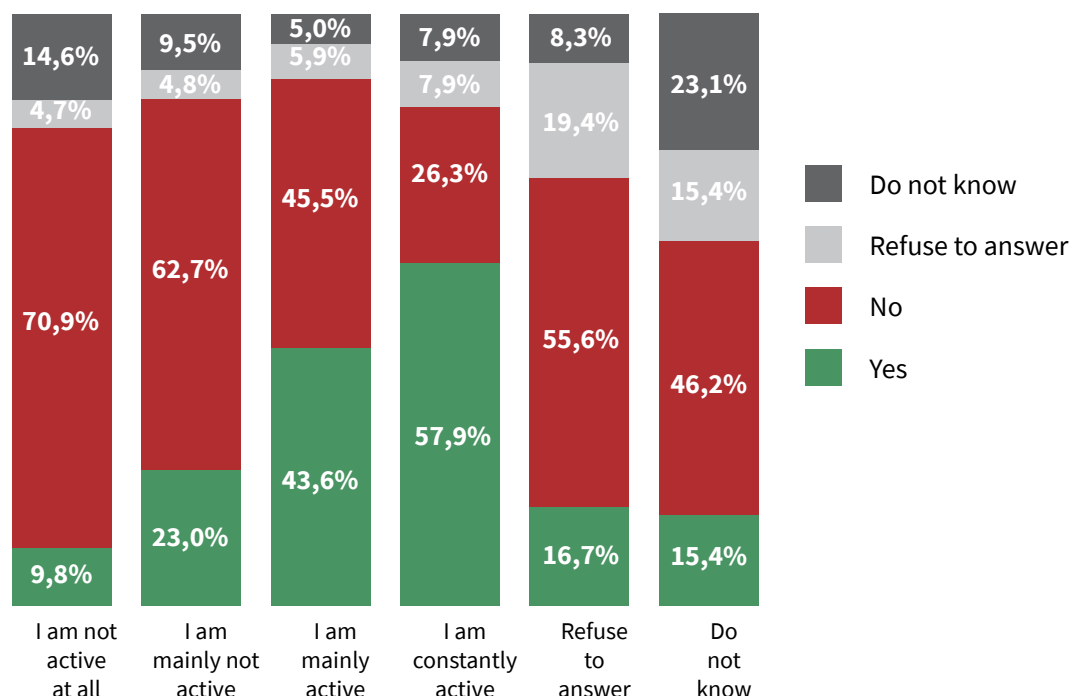


Figure 36: Do you think that the current government is committed enough to address the problems of youth?



It is noteworthy that the commitment of the government was perceived as significantly lower amongst respondents that were the least socially active (Figure 37). In other words, those respondents that believed that the government is not committed to solving the problems of the youth were also the most inactive in society. On the one hand, this may seem surprising and counterintuitive from the standpoint that negative attitudes towards a government usually encourages citizens to become more active. In this scenario, inactive citizens are those who are satisfied with the way things are. On the other hand, it may well be the case that the very reason for social inactivism among respondents is due to their disappointment with the work of authorities and the extremely limited space they see for having an impact over their work (discussed below).

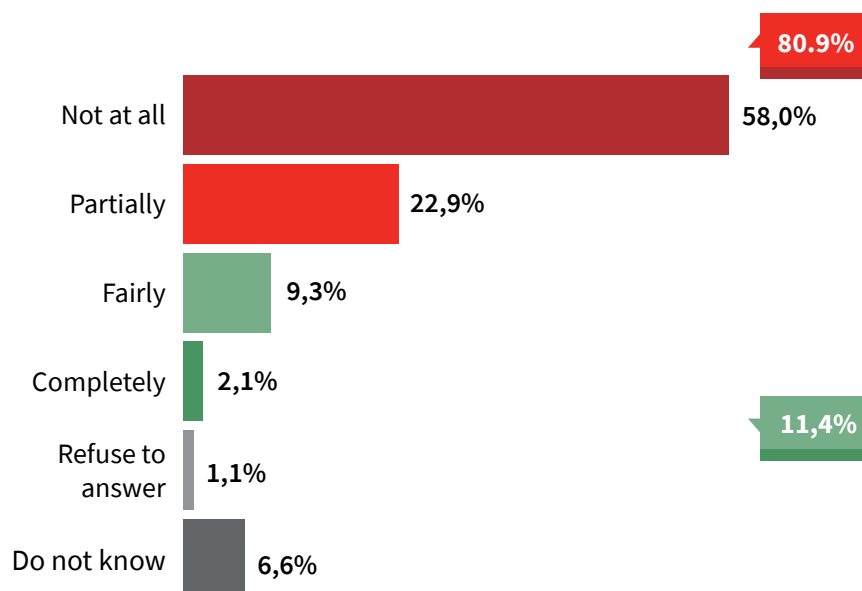
Figure 37: Do you think that the current government is committed enough to address the problems of youth?



Personal impact on the work of authorities

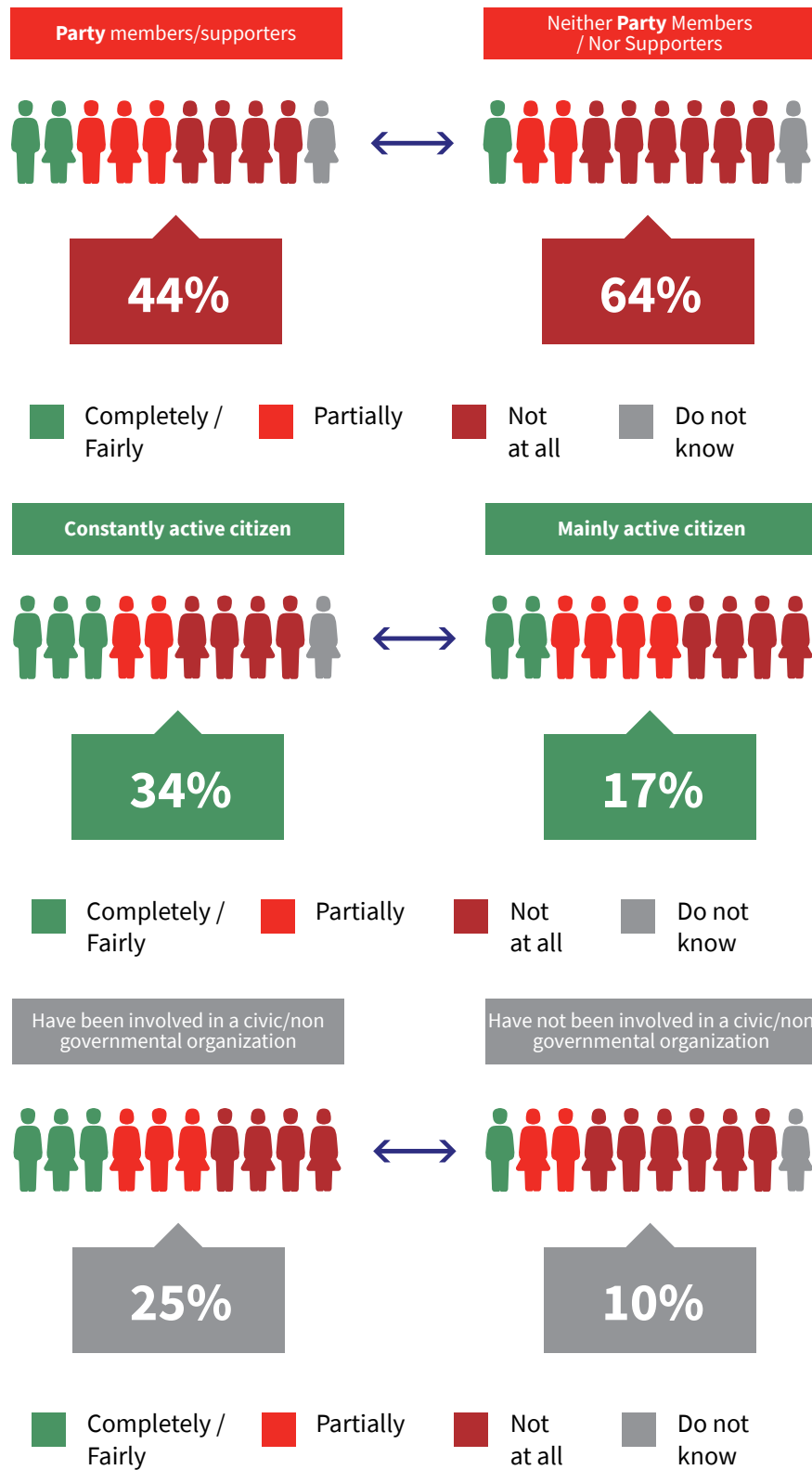
In addition to determining the level of confidence that young people have in the authorities, we were interested in seeing to what extent they feel that they can personally impact the way they work. As it is evident from the result presented in Figure 38, a significant portion of young people believe they cannot influence the way authorities operate, with six out of ten young people believing that they cannot have any impact at all. At the same time, only 2.1% of all respondents felt that they can completely impact how authorities operate. This finding does not come as a great surprise bearing in mind that young people are rather disappointed with how authorities operate and how much they care about their needs and problems. Perhaps this is one of the key reasons why so few young people are socially engaged. So instead of asking why so many young people do not contribute towards solving societal problems, we should perhaps ask why authorities care so little about young people that we allow the youth to feel so excluded.

Figure 38: To what extent do you feel that you can personally impact the way authorities work?



If we look at the responses in correlation with other questions, we find that political party members, socially active citizens and members of CSOs in higher percentage believe they can have an impact on the work of authorities. However, as evident from Figure 39 provided on the next page., the numbers are fairly small even within these groups.

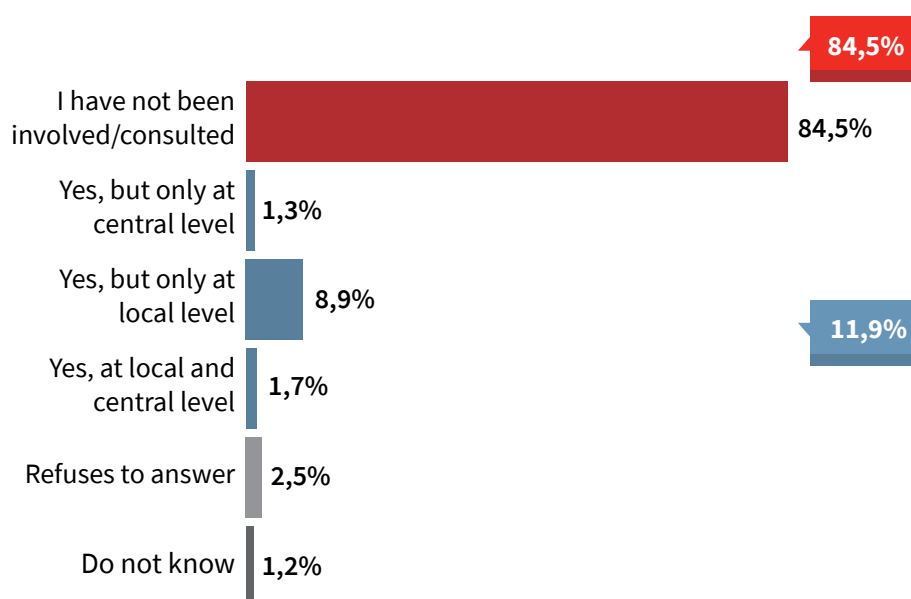
Figure 39: To what extent do you feel that you can personally impact the way authorities work?



Participation in institutional decision-making processes

With the aim of measuring the extent to which young people are included or excluded from decision-making processes in the institutional sphere, respondents were asked ‘Have you ever been involved in or consulted by the institutions when making decisions, excluding voting in elections?’ (Figure 40). The result that 84.5% of young people have never been consulted by any institution, while only 11.9% have been, makes it clear that young people are excluded from institutional conversations. Put simply, most young people are short of their right to contribute to the process of creating, monitoring and evaluating public policies at all levels. In this respect, it is safe to say that authorities (both at the central and local level) need to invest greater efforts in establishing decision-making processes that are more open and participatory.

Figure 40: Have you ever been involved in or consulted by the institutions when making decisions, excluding voting in elections?



Demographic factors such as gender, age, ethnicity and the place of living did not play a significant role in regards to participation in decision-making processes. It should be stressed however that none of the 15-18-year olds in our sample, as well as respondents who live in villages, said that they have ever been consulted by central authorities.

As for other correlations, it is relevant to note that respondents who declared to have taken part in the activities of citizen/non-governmental organizations or other initiatives, were significantly more involved in institutional decision-

making at both central and local level compared to those who have not. Therefore, it seems that activism through citizen organizations or other initiatives is a rare avenue for young people in the country to be heard by institutions.

Finally, the survey results show that overall members/supporters of political parties are more involved/consulted by institutions. The major difference seems to be at the local level where 22% of members/supporters said that they have been involved/consulted compared to just 3.3% of non-members/supporters. At the central level, however, the engagement of members/supporters of political parties drops significantly (1.5%) and does not differ from that of non-members/supporters (1.3%), which means that decision-making at the central level is quite restricted for all young people regardless of their proximity to political parties.

INSIGHTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

Young people in the focus groups consistently referred to the ways in which they are excluded from institutional politics and the lack of possible ways of having influence over them. It was frequently argued that politicians are not interested in the views of young people and that they are judgmental in the way they approach young people (e.g. often threatening them as immature and not taking their opinions and proposals seriously). It was said with a significant frequency that the only way to force politicians to act and to take young people's concerns seriously is by mass protests. Young people felt that in order for an issue to be solved it has to escalate and reach a crisis stage. Moreover, many participants quite openly and vigorously said to hold politicians in low esteem, lacking trust in them or respect for them. The lack of faith in politicians was attributed to their failure to listen, to keep promises or to change anything for the better. None of the participants described politicians as having an underlying belief or passion for their work. Interestingly, many young people acknowledged that CSOs care much more about the youth compared to state institutions – something that did not arise so clearly in the survey.

It is also worth noting the fact that young people's distrust, cynicism and disappointment with institutions and politics do not simply mean that they are not interested in contributing to the improvement of society. The discussions in the focus groups provided clear indications that young people are willing to engage and influence the decision-making processes that have impact on their lives. However, it was evident that the existing structures and mechanisms do not grant them with such opportunities.

Exercise: If politics were a restaurant

INSIGHTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

In order to provide an insight into how young people perceive politics and politicians, participants were asked to imagine politics being a restaurant. Participants generally found this exercise stimulating and had a lot to share. The terminology and symbols used to describe the restaurant conveyed an extremely negative impression of politics and politicians. Participants consistently described the 'restaurant' as having unfair and astronomically high prices, making it unaffordable to the general public. Besides, some alluded that the only way to get a table is by knowing the owner or having some other inside connections. There was also some discussion about the music. As a reflection of the perceived sameness of all politicians, participants described the music as being monotonous, with just one song being played on repeat regardless of who is playing. The menu was seen as offering an extremely limited choice. Depending on their status some would eat sausages, while others caviar. Moreover, participants imagined that it is the guests who do the dishes without being paid for it. There was also an impression that the restaurant was overstaffed and that only a few people actually did meaningful work.

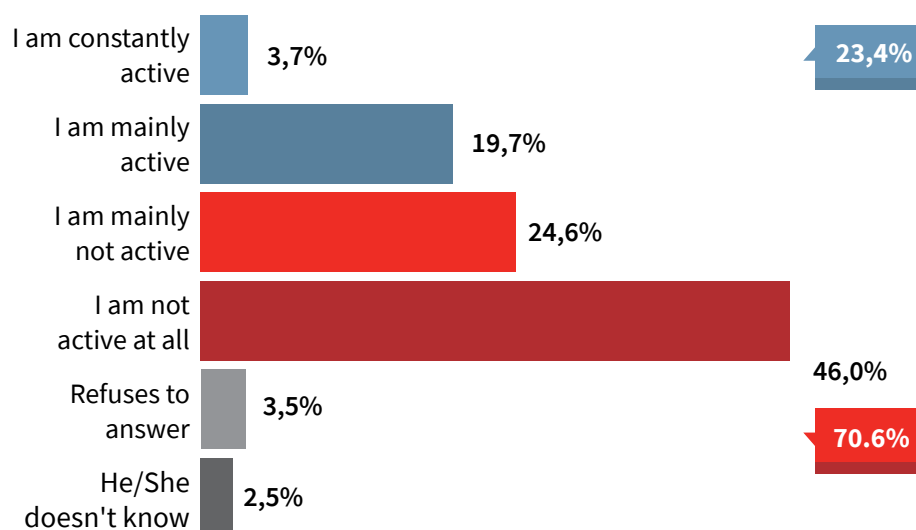
5.5. Civil participation of youth in society

In this section, we explored the extent of sociopolitical activism evident among the youth as well as the potential triggers (issues, institutions or individuals) that can encourage young people to become active.

The extent of social activism among the youth

When asked 'Would you describe yourself as a socially active citizen?' (Figure 41), 70.6% of young people describe themselves as socially inactive, out of which for 46% there was a complete absence of activism. Only 3.7% described themselves as constantly active and additional 19.7% as mainly active.

Figure 41: Would you describe yourself as a socially active citizen?



One of the strongest predictors of social activism was the respondents' satisfaction with their position in society as well as the general direction in which the country is moving. Young people who had more positive outlooks were also more likely to be socially active. Despite the fact that a correlative analysis cannot help us determine what comes first, activism or satisfaction, and which one serves to trigger the other, there is still a case to be made that activism reduces the degree of apathy and cynicism evident amongst the youth.

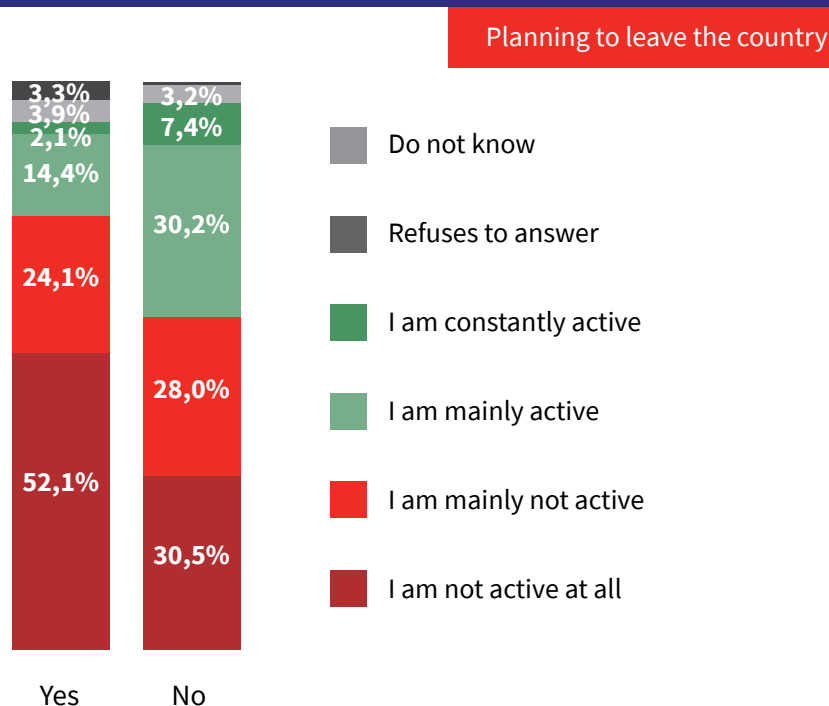
The family income of respondents was also a strong predictor for activism. Those respondents who reported higher family income were more active than those that reported a lower family income. In this context, if we consider the worrisome (and earlier established⁴) fact that 69.2% of all respondents stated that their family income is low or very low, it seems necessary to suggest that a possible starting point in the attempt to address the apathy and inactivity of the youth is to improve the overall financial situation of households.

The relationship between young people's intentions to leave the country and social activism was also strong. As evident from Figure 42, the willingness to move abroad was much smaller among those who described themselves as

⁴ See socio-demographic structure of respondents, Figure 7.

mainly or constantly active. In this respect, it seems reasonable to suggest that activism may turn young people away from the idea of leaving the country.

Figure 42: Would you describe yourself as a socially active citizen?



Moreover, we asked respondents ‘*How often do you take action to solve a particular social issue?*’ (Figure 43). More than half of respondents (57.1%) said that they have never taken action to solve a particular social issue, while 35.5% answered that they have taken action (even though only 8% have done that often or constantly). When those who have taken action were confronted with an additional question ‘*How often have you managed to solve the issue?*’, the results show that about two-thirds of young people (66.9%) do not succeed in solving their problem. In this context, the fairly low success rate can be seen as a factor which destimulates young people from trying to address social issues in the first place. In other words, because previous attempts have been disastrous, young people see no point in any type of social engagement. Hence, one of the key questions that remain to be addressed by authorities is how to activate more young people while making sure that their activism is appreciated and has an impact over social developments.

Figure 43: How often do you take action to solve a particular social issue?

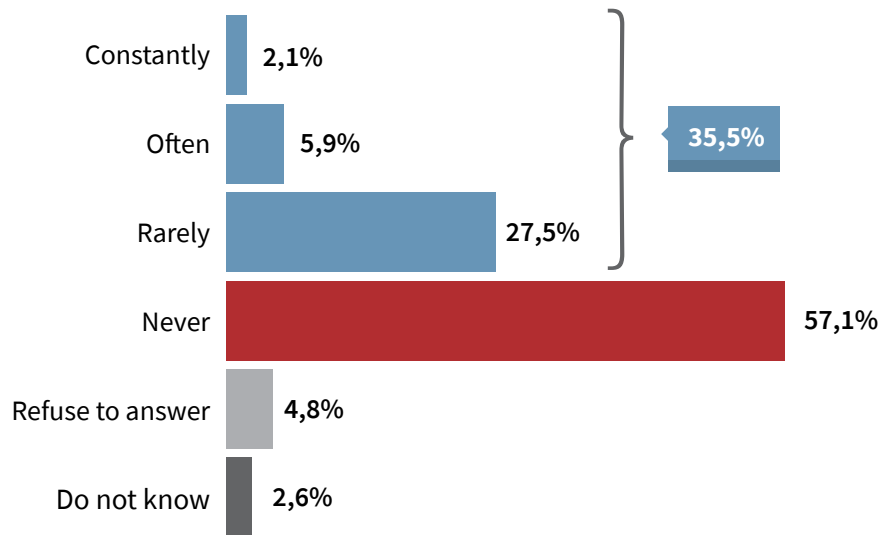
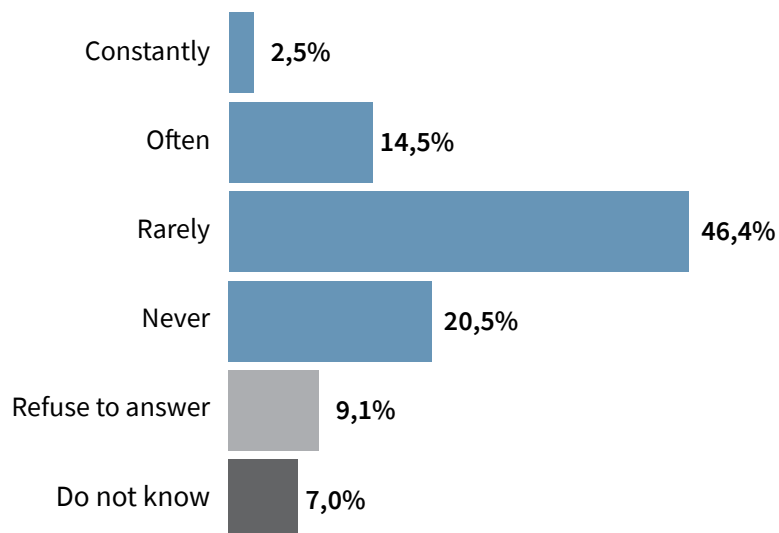
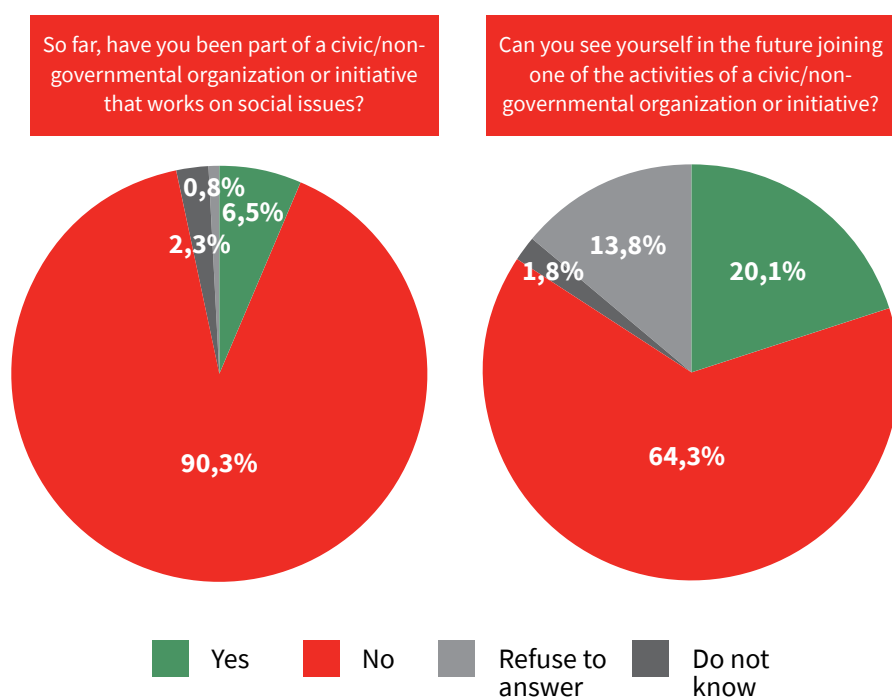


Figure 43: How often do you take action to solve a particular social issue?



Connected to a specific type of social activism, we also asked respondents ‘So far, have you been part of a civic/non-governmental organization or initiative that works on social issues?’ (Figure 44). Only 6.5% of all respondents replied that they have been engaged in the work of a civic/non-governmental organization or some other initiative. What is even more discouraging being that only 20% of the respondents who have not been a part of a civic/non-governmental organization or initiative can see themselves joining one in the future.

Figure 44: So far, have you been part of a civic/non-governmental organization or initiative that works on social issues?



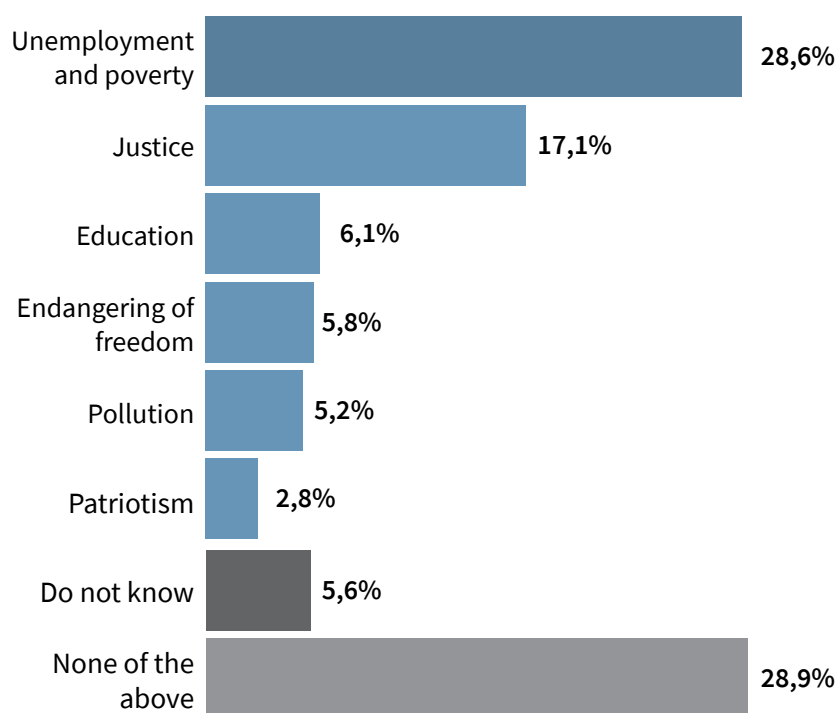
These results clearly show that such forms of engagement are not particularly popular among the youth. In her analysis of youth participation across Eastern Europe, conducted almost two decades ago, Kovacheva (2000) stated that only 10% (and in some countries even less than 5%) of young people were members of civil society organizations. In the context of our findings outlined above, it is safe to say that unfortunately there has not been much improvement since the study of Kovacheva was conducted.

The reason for this lower civic inclusion can be in part attributed to the inherent distrust that people have in the power of formal organizations as well as fundamental lack of belief in civic activism as a force for change. Owing to a tradition inherited from the socialist past of former Yugoslavia ‘a large number of Macedonian citizens continue to believe in the absolute authority of the State to cater for all social needs’ (Sterland and Rizova: 32). Drawing on Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993), the weakness of civil society can be also attributed to a deficit of social capital in post-communist societies, which itself is linked with the notion of trust.

What can trigger sociopolitical activism among the youth?

In addition to finding what share of the youth is active, we were also interested in finding which issues, groups and individuals can potentially trigger and encourage the youth to be socially and politically active (Figure 45). We asked respondents to choose only one option (i.e. their first choice) for each of the three questions shown below.

Figure 45: Which of the following may encourage you to be socially and politically active?



Issues such as unemployment and poverty, as well as justice, were by far the most important triggers compared to other issues such as education, the endangerment of freedom, pollution and patriotism that ranked lower.

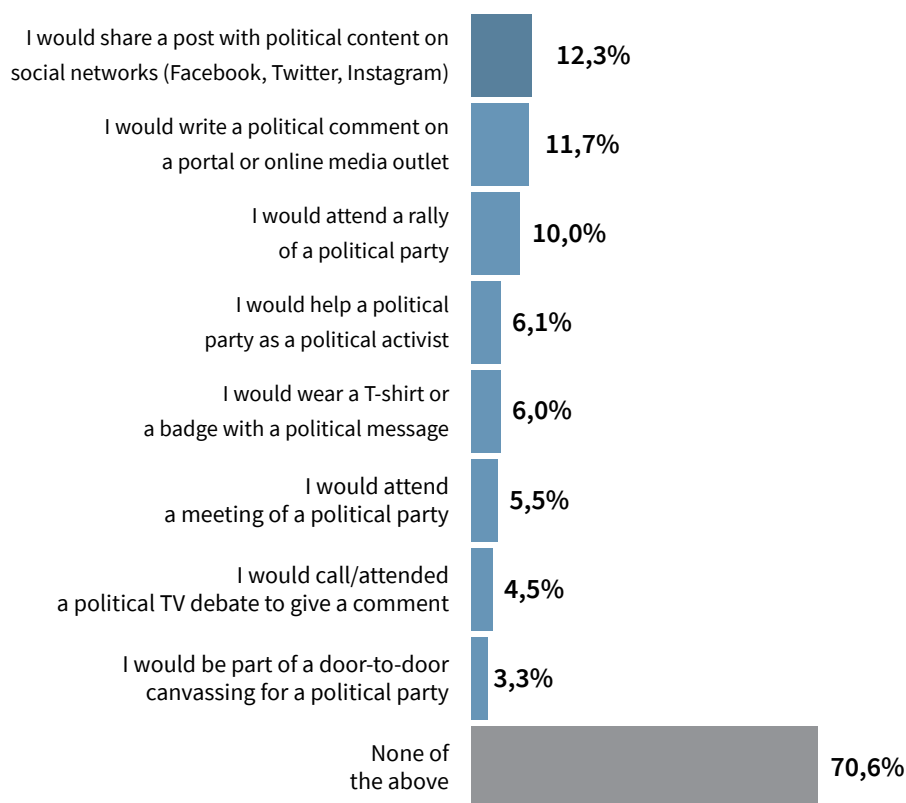
Moreover, from the groups that respondents were able to choose from, it is informal initiatives and movements, as well as youth and other non-governmental organizations that hold the highest potential for sparking activism amongst the youth. Not far behind are high school and student bodies as well as political parties and their youth wings.

As far as the influence of particular individuals is concerned, quite evidently it is people from the immediate (inner) circle, such as family members, friends and partners that are most likely to serve as encouragement for social and political activism. The importance of the inner circle was particularly pronounced among ethnic Albanians. Interestingly, online influences have a higher potential to activate young people than professors, athletes or celebrities. Journalists were at the bottom of the list and out of 1025 respondents, only two respondents chose them as the top people who can encourage them to become active.

Regardless of whether one is talking about issues, groups or individuals, what seems striking is that for a substantial share of young people, none of the items listed can trigger them to become socially active. This was most especially evident amongst ethnic Macedonian respondents, who on average were roughly three times more likely to answer 'none of the above' compared to ethnic Albanians. While it may well be the case that the items listed are not fully comprehensive in the sense that they do not cover everything or everyone who might encourage activism among the youth, it remains rather problematic that there is not a single thing from the listed items that can get them motivated to be socially engaged.

In one of the survey questions, we looked specifically at the readiness of young people for political activism in various formal and informal ways. As evident from Figure 46, we provided them with a list of potential activities. More than two-thirds (70.6%) of respondents claimed that they would not participate in any of the activities that were listed. Political activism seems to be mostly online, with roughly one out of ten young people who would share a post with political content on social media or write a political comment on a portal or online media outlet. More traditional forms of political activism, especially those that include working in the service of a political party, were less preferred by respondents.

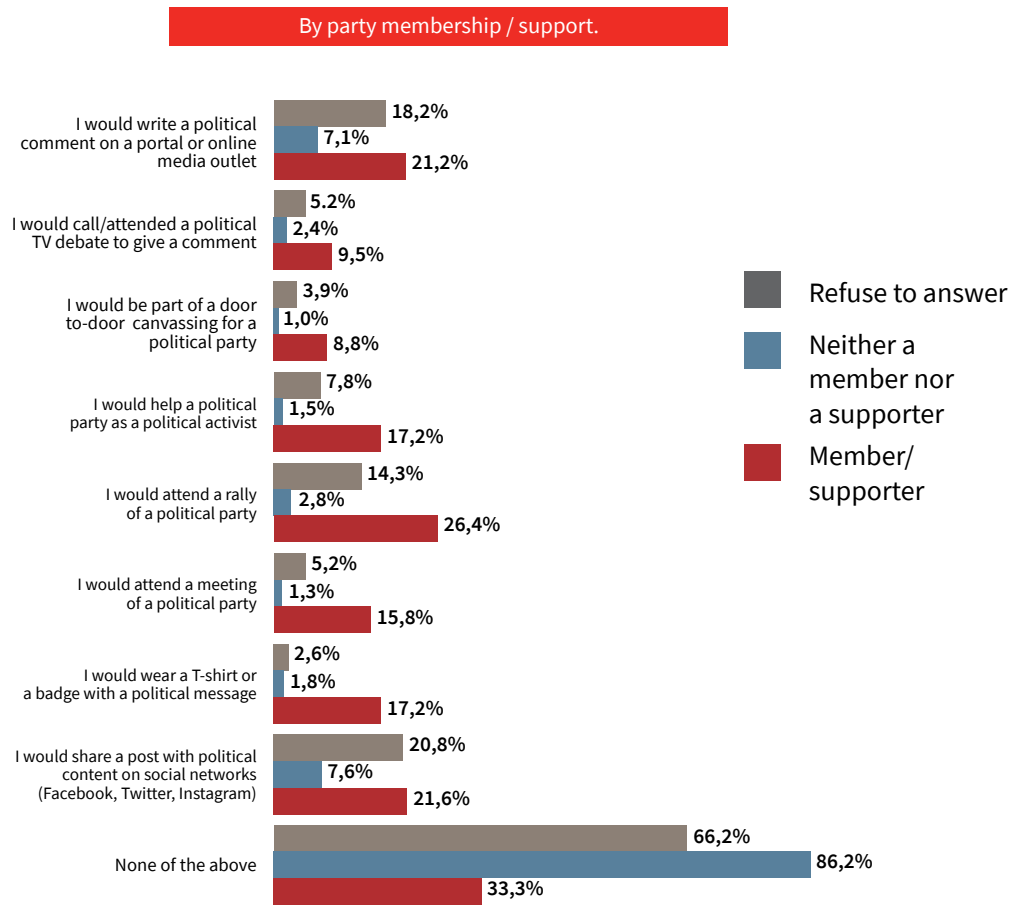
Figure 46: Would you participate in any of the following activities?



The assumption that online activism is more important to young people than offline activism is also confirmed later in the survey with the help of the statement *‘Nowadays, online activism is more important than offline activism’* that 71% of respondents agreed with.

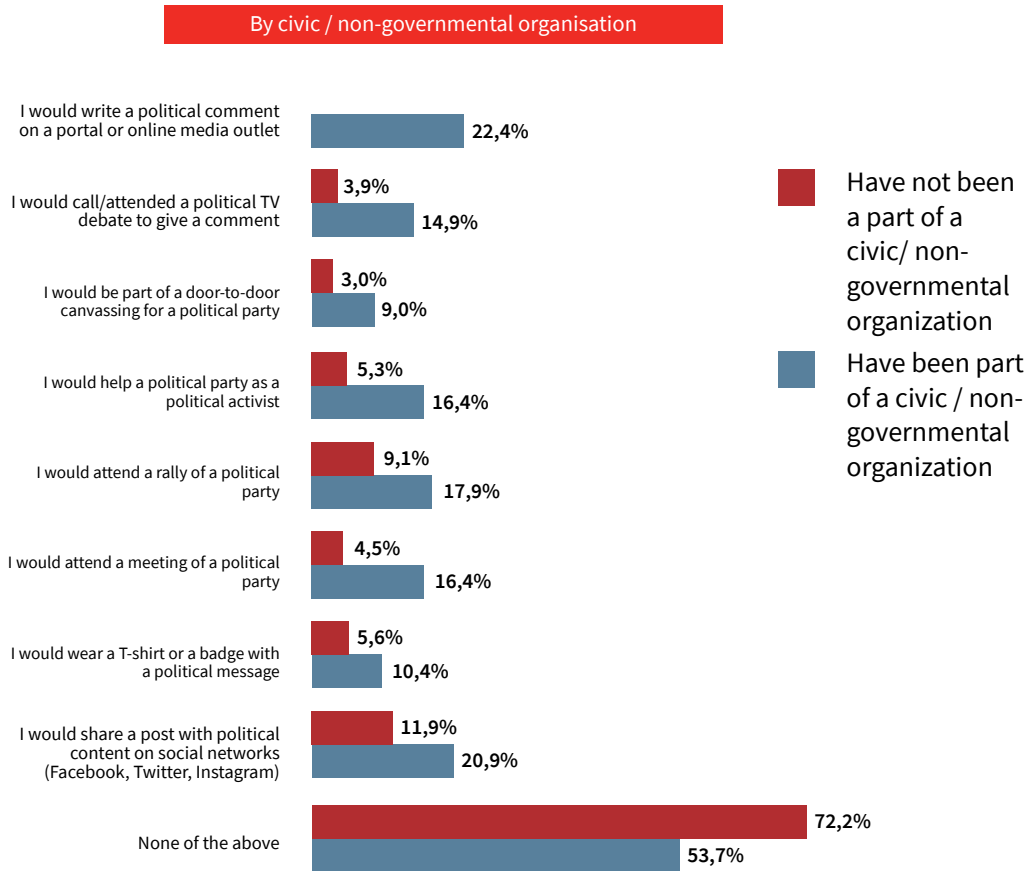
Expectedly, as shown in Figure 47, the readiness of party members/supporters to engage in both offline and online political activities was higher, often two times or more compared to non-members/supporters.

Figure 47 : Would you participate in any of the following activities?



Interestingly, a much higher readiness for political activism was also evident among respondents who have been part of a civic/non-governmental organization, which seems to suggest that social activism often translates, or is closely related, to political activism as well (Figure 48).

Figure 48 : Would you participate in any of the following activities?



A widespread perception among participants in the focus groups was that inactivism among the youth is driven by the perception that even if one tries, things are unlikely to change. Several participants shared their own stories where they have attempted to solve a particular issue but indicated that their efforts did not yield success, or yielded limited success. In cases where they have contacted institutions with specific requests or proposals, it was emphasised that they have never been given a response by the relevant authority. Some participants were not discouraged by their failed efforts and saw such experiences as additional fuel for their activism, while others felt defeated in their attempts which ultimately eroded their will for activism.

Those participants that declared themselves as socially active mentioned that they are often stigmatized by their peers for their activism, and sometimes even openly discouraged to be active. It was mentioned that in some cases they are being laughed at or criticized for joining a non-governmental organization or similar initiative. In this respect, it was also stated that they often struggle to convince their peers that what they do is personally meaningful and satisfactory.

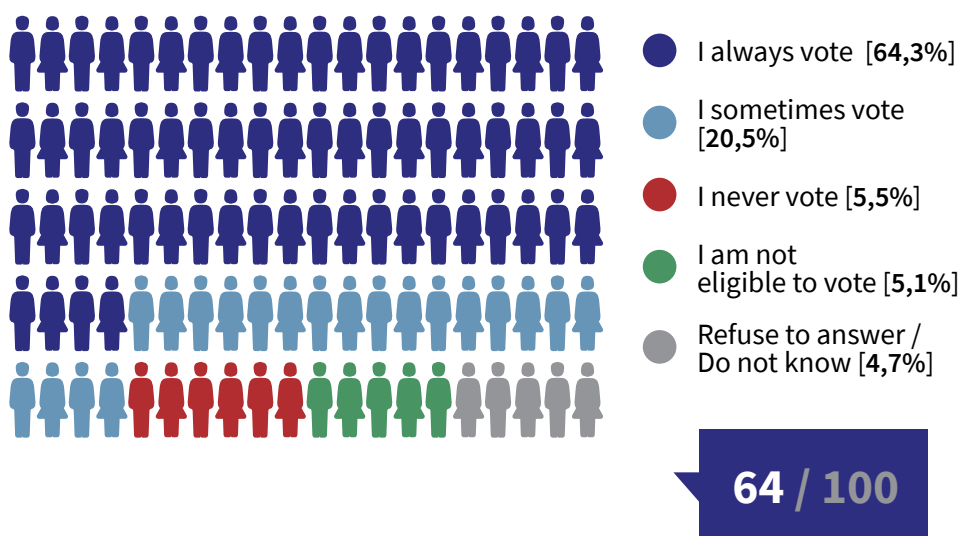
Several participants considered with regret that a significant share of young people would rather spend their time socialising (e.g. drinking coffee with friends or playing video games) than being socially active. They were critical of their peers in saying that they are passive, lack agency and wait for others to take care of their business.

5.6. Youth participation in elections and party membership

Voting at the elections

The results of the survey (Figure 49) indicate that a significant portion of the youth in Macedonia has a habit of going out to vote, with 64% of respondents stating that they always vote in elections and additional 20% stating that they sometimes vote. Only a small part (6%) of all respondents have stated that they never go out to vote, while the remaining were either not eligible to vote (5%) or refused to answer this question (5%).

Figure 49: How often do you vote in elections?



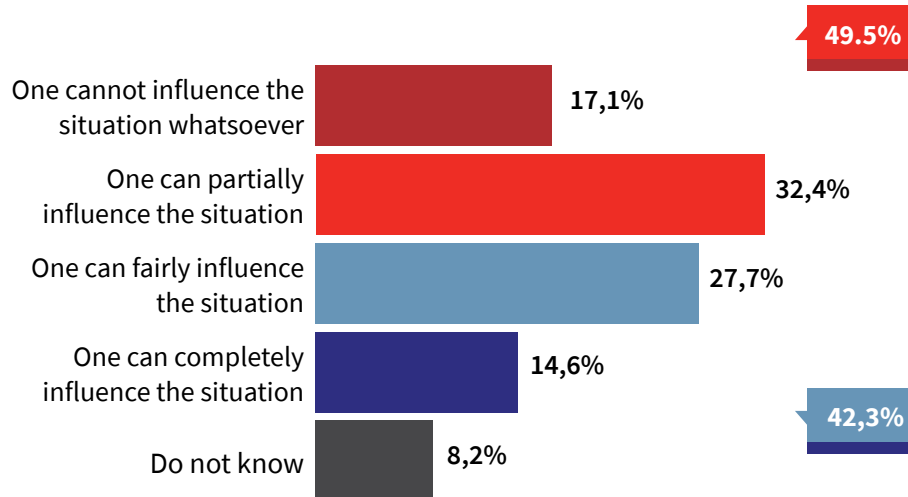
These findings tackle a common perception in the country (and more broadly across the Western Balkan region) that young people are withdrawing from conventional forms of politics, in particular, voting. In fact, from our results, it can be seen that the youth are far from being uninterested in voting. This can be viewed as a positive sign since voting in scientific research is consistently found to be a significant indicator of civic responsibility and one of the most important civic duties. Yet, the habit of voting among the youth in North Macedonia may well be connected to the intense mobilizations efforts and pressure applied by the political environment, including political parties.

When it comes to the influence of demographic variables such as age, gender and place of living significant differences were not recorded. Ethnicity was also a fairly insignificant variable when voting is concerned, with the difference that voter turnout among ethnic Macedonians was slightly higher than for other ethnic groups. Young people employed in the public sector and people with a higher monthly budget vote in higher percentage compared to those employed in other sectors or still in education or those with a lower monthly budget. Those respondents that declared themselves as party members or supporters, expectedly, were slightly more engaged in voting compared to non-members and non-supporters. However, as noted later in this report, outpolling data suggests that young people's political engagement in elections does not necessarily translate to party membership. Finally, education, along with civic engagement, was one of the strongest predictors of political participation through elections.

Voting efficacy

While most respondents were apparently interested in voting, they were far less certain when asked about the usefulness of voting. Nearly half of the respondents (49.5%) believed that they cannot influence the situation whatsoever by voting or can only partially influence the situation (Figure 50). Interestingly, this rather high per cent of respondents that expressed scepticism does not seem to call into question the interest in voting among the youth discussed earlier.

Figure 50: Regardless of whether you are eligible to vote, in your opinion, to what extent can one influence the situation in the country by voting in elections?

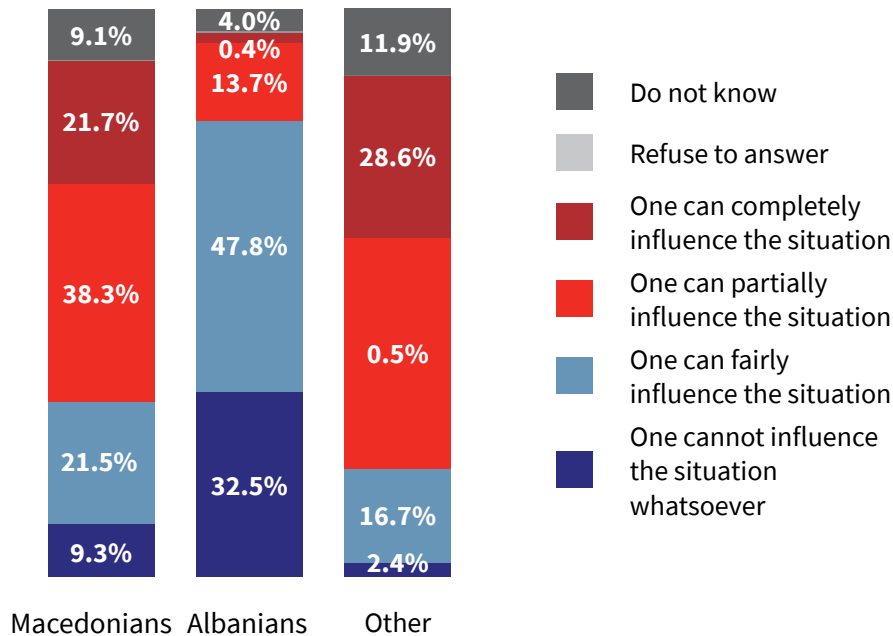


This poses the question of why so many young people decide to vote despite the fact that they are not convinced in the power of their vote. Whether this is a result of the nature of the overall political system in the country, connected to the idea that elections are one of few opportunities for young people to express their political opinions, or whether there is another explanation for these results is unclear from our survey. Nevertheless, a paradox evidently exists. A telling example of this is that of the 659 respondents who replied that they always vote, almost half of them (47.4%) also replied that they do not believe at all that one can influence the situation in the country by voting.

What is noteworthy is the stark difference in the perceived usefulness and impact of voting between political party members/supporters and non-party members/supporters. Overall, party members/supporters were far more convinced about the power of their vote (75.5%) compared to non-party members/supporters (29.3%).

On this question, there were some significant differences based on ethnicity (Figure 51): while 80% of ethnic Albanians believed that by voting in elections one can influence the situation in the country, only 31% of ethnic Macedonians and 19% of other ethnic minorities shared the same opinion. This difference may be explained by the fact that the votes of ethnic Albanians are usually decisive in deciding the election winner or fulfilling the election census. Yet, as we did not include questions that would help us explain this difference based on ethnicity, such conclusions are not to be inferred with certainty.

Figure 51: Regardless of whether you are eligible to vote, in your opinion, to what extent can one influence the situation in the country by voting in elections?

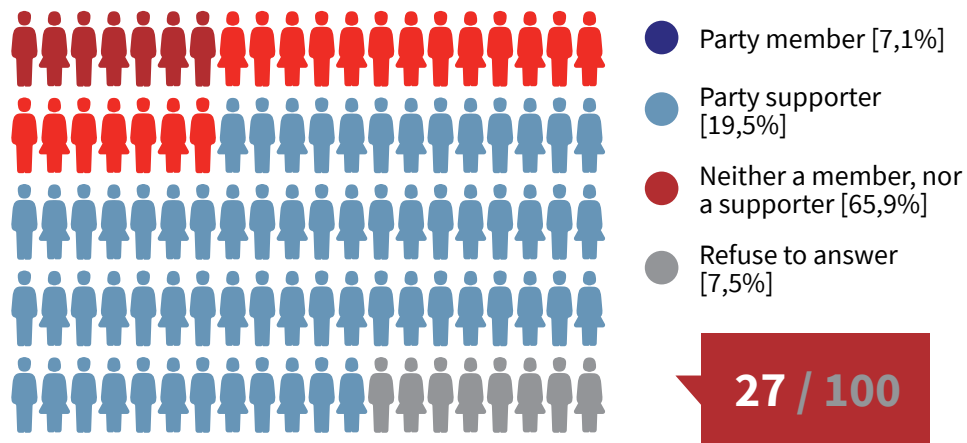


Based on gender, female respondents were slightly more optimistic than their male counterparts, however, the difference is within the margin of error despite being statistically significant. No other demographic factors played a significant role.

Political party membership and support among the youth

One of the hypotheses that we departed from was that a significant portion of young people in the country would be political party members. However, this assumption was not confirmed as only 7% of the young people stated that they are party members (about 5% lower than in a similar study conducted in Serbia), while additional 20% declared themselves as party supporters. From the rest, 65% stated that they are neither members or supporters and 8% refused to answer (Figure 52).

Figure 52: Are you a member or a supporter of a political party?



These results can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, it may well be the case that a fraction of the respondents refused to openly share their political orientation, which is not surprising when regarded in the wider societal context of North Macedonia. Due to a potential fear of stigmatisation it is quite common for people in the country to be cautious in revealing their political preferences.

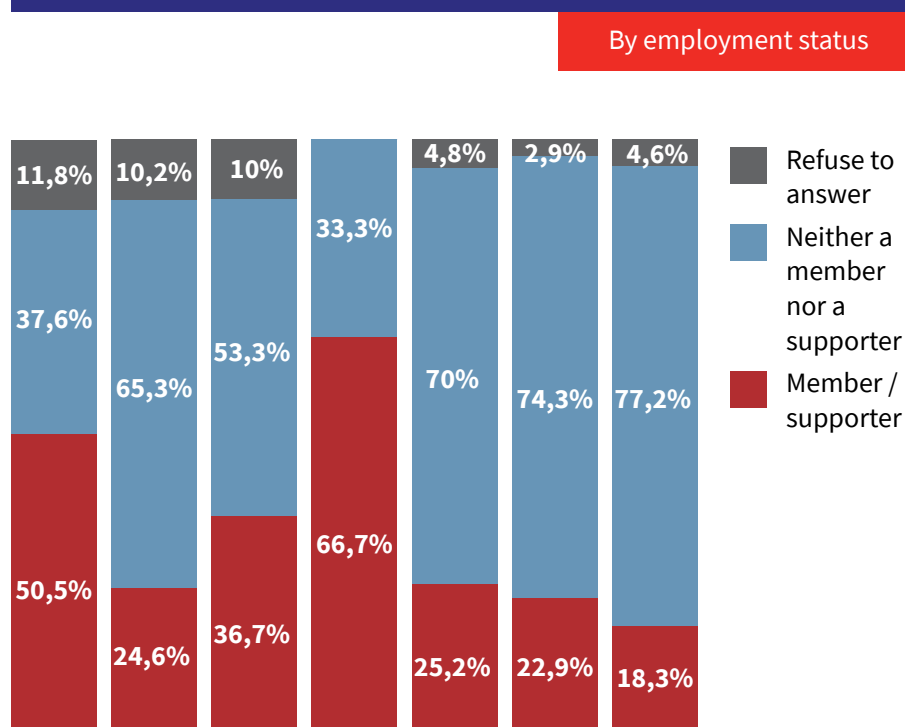
On the other hand, a plausible explanation appears to be that many young people have a dim view of political parties, scepticism about their efficacy and doubts that they are capable of representing their views and interest. If we accept this kind of reasoning the results can be a clear signal to political parties that young people are abandoning traditional political structures as they tend to undervalue issues that are important to them.

If we follow scientific literature and examples across Europe, it is evident that party membership has changed both in character and significance, and has plummeted particularly among the younger population. Some authors, quite unfortunately, argue that the decline in party membership among youth and its consequence do not generally lead to political parties taking more interest in young people. For Hooghe and Stolle (2005: 45) the question, therefore, is not whether young people are still interested in politics, but whether political parties are still interested in young people.

The profile of political party members and supporters

When cross-tabulated with the employment status of respondents it is evident that most political party members and supporters are employed in the public administrations - almost by a half more than those employed in the private sector or those that declared as unemployed (Figure 44). This result is not too surprising having in mind the fact that the practice of using the public administration for political purposes is widespread in Macedonia across spheres of life and used by all political parties. Most job positions in the public sector are perceived to be filled with so-called ‘party soldiers’ usually with little or no suitable working experience. In this context, as Hislope (2013: 627) notes ‘all parties in Macedonia function as *de facto* job agencies’. This practice often translates in the private sector as well where ‘even positions in the toll stations on the highways are assigned according to party membership’ (Gaber-Damjanovski and Jovevska 2008: 28 [cf. Hislope 2013]).

Figure 53: Are you a member or a supporter of a political party?



According to the financial status, party members and supporters reported their financial status to be above average in a higher per cent than non-party members and supporters. One could assume that party members/supporters are entitled to (financial) resources and privileges that others do not have access to. Anecdotally, it is often claimed that the motives behind joining a political party in the country are largely encouraged by self-interested instrumentalist reasons like acquiring employment in public institutions or other financial opportunities.

Party commitment and vote switching

In an attempt to provide a fuller picture of youth's voting behaviour, we asked respondents the following question: 'If the policies of the party you support prove to be unsuccessful, would you vote for another party?' (Figure 54). We believe that this question provides a useful lens for understanding the extent of partisan commitment and vote switching among young voters - namely, whether their partisan identity and voting behaviour is more fluid or firmly entrenched.

Our results show that half (50.2%) of the young people would vote for another party if the policies of the party they support prove to be unsuccessful, while 16.8% would remain loyal to their political party. The remaining share of respondents either refused to answer this question (9%) or did not know what they would do in such a situation (24%).

Figure 54: If the policies of the party you support prove to be unsuccessful, would you vote for another party?



This data makes it clear that voting intentions among youth can be frequently alerted and that they are quite capable of switching partisan positions. In other words, a significant portion of young people who think that a party that they support has handled issues poorly will potentially vote to turn it out of office to see if the opposition can do better. Interestingly, ethnic Albanian respondents (58.6%) and respondents from other ethnicities (64.3%) expressed much higher readiness to vote for another party, compared to ethnic Macedonians (46.6%).

Political science research suggests that party members and supporters are more likely to exhibit stable voting behaviour and party preference than non-partisans. That is, it assumes that the stronger the party identification is, the lower the likelihood of vote switching. In our study, the percentage of respondents who said that they would not vote for another party even if the policies of the party they support prove to be unsuccessful was, expectedly, higher among political party members and supporters (24.2%) compared to non-members and non-supporters (14.1%).

At the same time, the number of swing voters (i.e. people that responded affirmatively on the question) was roughly the same between non-members/non-supporters (52.1%) and members/supporters (51.6%). Encouragingly, this indicates that a substantial share of young voters is not deeply entrenched and do not blindly vote for political parties, but they think afresh about how to cast their ballot based on the performance of political actors.

Mirroring the findings from the survey, the majority of participants said that they regularly vote at elections. Some participants stated that they find it incredibly difficult to decide how to cast their ballot as there is a rather limited political offer available. The challenge in deciding whom to vote for was also connected to the fact that political parties have a relatively vague social objective and lack clarity on many issues. For other participants, however, choosing how to vote was relatively easy.

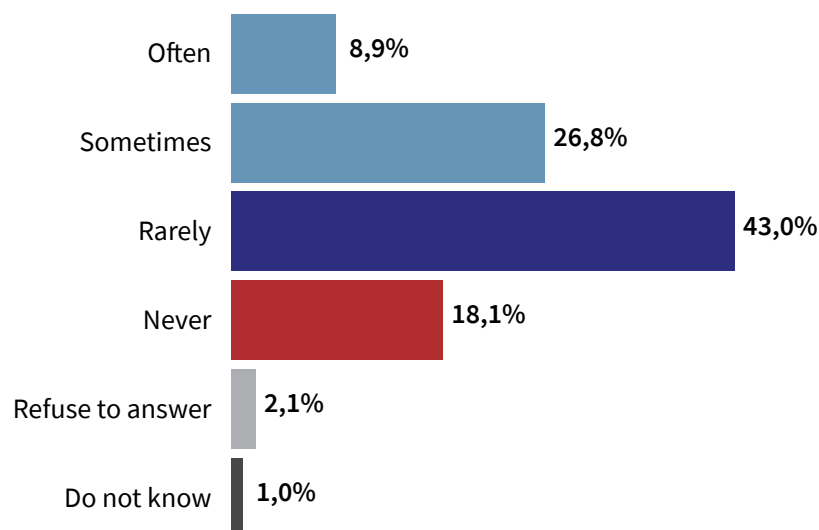
Scepticism about the usefulness of voting was less evident compared to the findings in the survey. Only few participants believed that voting serves no purpose. The majority believed that voting is important and that it can bring positive change to some extent. However, it was not the urge for change that surfaced as the key reason for voting, but rather the perception that voting is an important civic duty. Several participants believed that voting abstention can lead to a crisis, as well as manipulation or coercion of the vote.

5.7. Sources of information and interest in political developments among the youth

The extent to which young people show interest in, and discuss politics

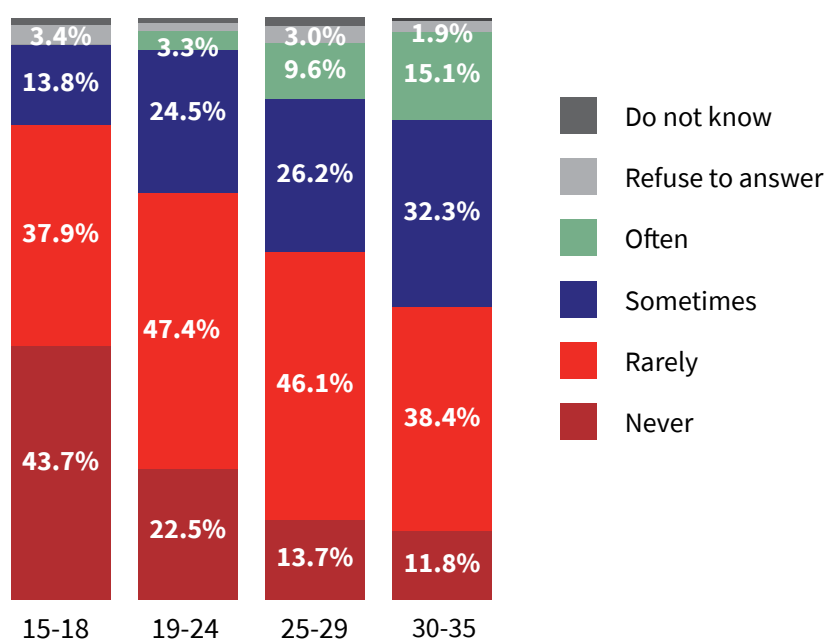
Overall, our survey finds that the majority of young people express a low level of interest in following political affairs in the country (Figure 55). Namely, only 8.9% of respondents said to follow political events frequently and 26.8% to follow them sometimes, while 43% rarely and almost one-fifth (18.1%) answered that they never follow political events.

Figure 55: How often do you follow and show interest in political events and developments in the country?



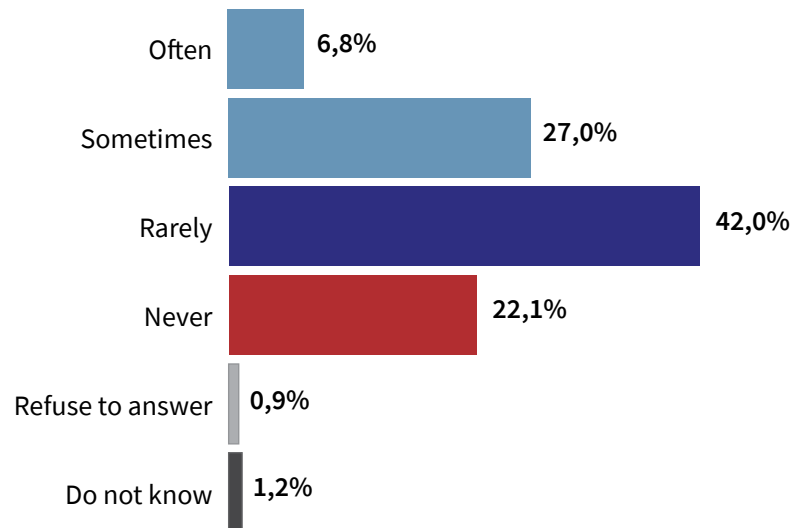
Expectedly, as shown in Figure 56, interest in politics increases with age: younger citizens (particularly non-voters between the age of 15-18) showed the lowest interest in political events and developments in the country, whereas respondents in the age bracket of 30-35 expressed the highest interest.

Figure 56: How often do you follow and show interest in political events and developments in the country?



When it comes to the extent to which young people discuss politics the results were quite similar: with 6.8% saying that they often discuss politics, 27% sometimes, 42% rarely and 22.1% answering that they never discuss politics (Figure 57). Again, age was an important factor determining engagement in political discussions, with older respondents showing much more interest in talking politics. This increase of interest in politics as young people grow older and as politics start to have more relevance in their lives is fairly consistent with existing findings in other countries.

Figure 57: How often do you discuss the current political developments in the country



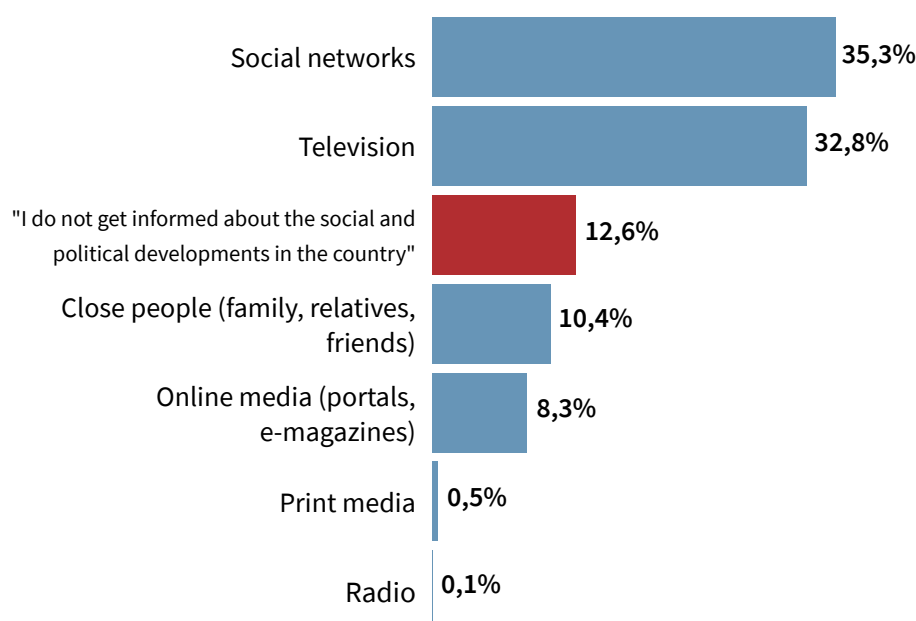
The fact that close to two-thirds of young people rarely or never show interest or discuss politics is worrisome. The danger here is that the majority of young people go out to vote politically uninformed, and thus raising a fundamental question as to how young citizens acquire their political norms, values and orientations. To this point, a recent study asks a provocative and much relevant question: ‘How can democracy possibly be successful when it relies on the choices of voters who know so little?’ (Oppenheimer and Edwards 2012: 32-33). With this in mind, the information deficit about politics among the youth can be absolutely crippling to the already fragile democracy in North Macedonia.

While these results are worrying, some critics in the scientific literature have attempted to turn this argument around suggesting that young people’s apparent lack of interest in politics can also be seen as a rational response to their own powerlessness and exclusion from the domain of politics. In simple terms, why should they bother to learn about and discuss something that they have no or very little power to influence? Likewise, it has been argued that mainstream media has failed to keep pace with the changing cultural competencies of young people. Research from the US shows that young people prefer the more informal and ironic style of new media when it comes to everyday politics.

Where do young people get their news about politics?

Unsurprisingly, social media channels and online media combined are the most important source of information about politics and public affairs amongst youth (43.6%) (Figure 58). While internationally recent years have seen the gradual erosion of television as a source of political news among the youth, its reach in North Macedonia remains significant (32.8%) and still fairly close to that of social/online media. Moreover, 10.4% of respondents said to get informed by close people in their immediate surrounding, such as friends and family. Surprisingly, only 0.5% and 0.1% of respondents use print media and radio respectively to get their news about politics. Finally, 12.6% responded that they do not get informed about the social and political developments in the country from any source.

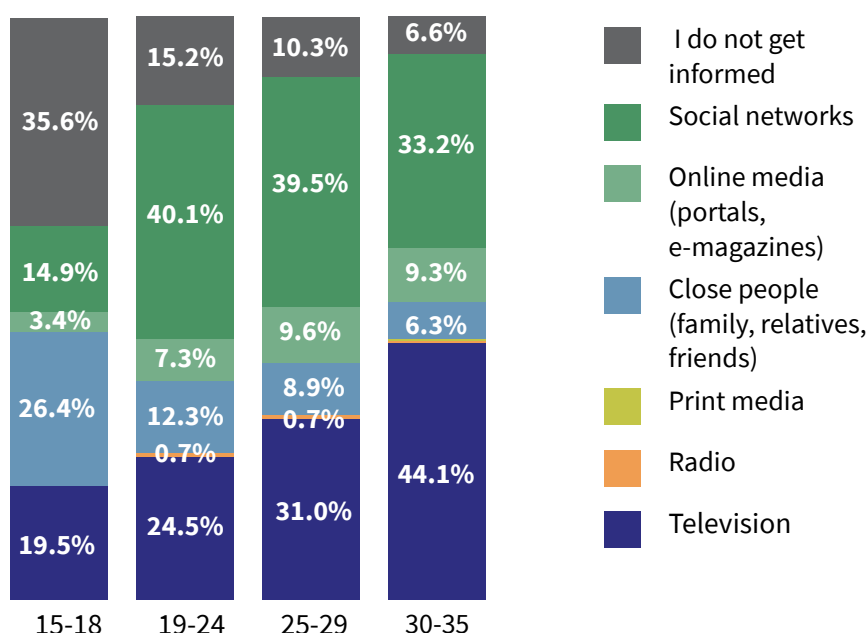
Figure 58: What sources do you most commonly use to get informed about the social and political developments in the country



If we look at the age distribution (Figure 59), it is evident that young people in the age bracket 15-18 (i.e. non-voters) have the following characteristics that set them apart significantly from others: they have the highest percentage of all respondents who choose not to get informed, the highest percentage

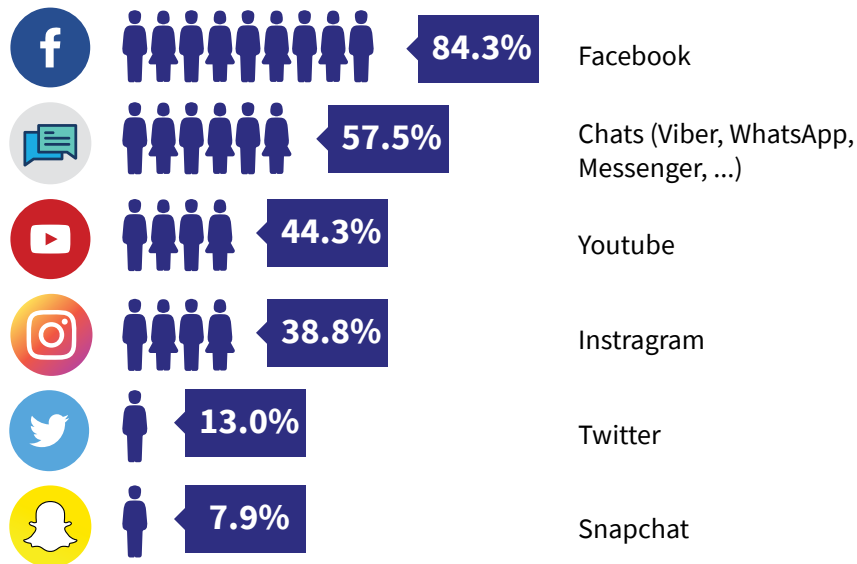
who get informed through close people, and the lowest percentage that gets informed either through television or social networks and online media. It is also interesting to see that there is a strong difference in the responses between the youngest (15-18) and oldest (30-35) age bracket considering the ways in which they get informed. Additionally, it is evident that as young people grow older, they are more likely to get informed rather than not getting informed at all, with television as a source steadily growing and close people as a source steadily dropping.

Figure 59: What sources do you most commonly use to get informed about the social and political developments in the country?



Unsurprisingly, from the available options that respondents were given, Facebook came up as the dominant social site used by young people with 84.3%, followed by various chatting platforms (57.5%) and YouTube (44%) (Figure 60).

Figure 60: Which of the following online communication channels and social networks do you most commonly use?



The extent to which respondents use these channels to acquire political information was not explored in the survey. In scientific literature, some authors have warned that the increase of social media might lead to the formation of filter bubbles where people get information about politics from a few sources that largely confirm their pre-existing views. Others, however, suggest that the situation, in fact, may be the opposite – providing evidence that people who get informed about politics via online search engines and/or social media sites report using significantly more diverse sources of news than those who do not. It is thus claimed that search engines and social media lead people to a wider source of news that they would have used otherwise.

In the focus groups, participants were invited in a more expansive way to talk about their interest in politics and the channels they use to get informed about political events. As expected, there was some variation between the reported levels of political interest. Some of those that said to follow politics on a regular basis (usually defined by participants as following the news almost every day), explained their level of connection with politics as a civic responsibility. Others in the same group could be labelled as being ‘cynically interested’ in following politics. They attributed their, albeit negative, interest in politics as a

sort of entertainment, usually focusing on current affairs as a cause for amusement. Some young people mentioned acquiring an interest in politics as a result of discussions at home with their parents (e.g. whilst their parents were watching the news or some other programme associated with politics). Discussions with friends and other peers were reported far less commonly.

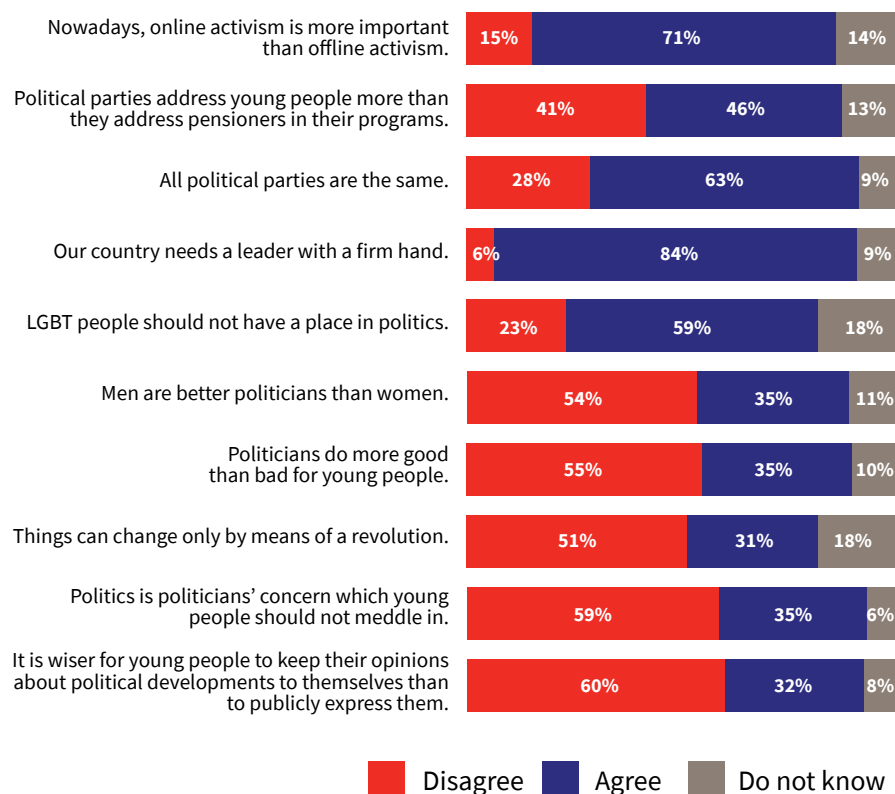
Other participants had a lot to say about the various features and factors that have turned them away from politics. Participants talked about their lack of knowledge and understanding of politics and the difficulties they perceive in trying to grasp such a complex subject, with all its jargons and wording used. There was a concern that schools are not doing enough to expose them to information about politics and to educate them about political institutions, their roles and the processes they engage in. The lack of trust in politicians and political parties and their non-commitment to telling the truth, keeping promises and being accountable was also stated as a reason that turns them away from politics. For some, disengagement from political affairs and exposure to political news resulted from choosing to actively 'switch off' in order to preserve their mental well-being and avoid 'headaches'.

Finally, the way political content is delivered and spoken about in the media was also mentioned as a contributing factor to low levels of political interest. The format in which political news is presented by TV channels was particularly emphasized as being monotonous and boring, whereas the length of time it takes to deliver political news on TV was seen as particularly problematic. Underpinning this boredom was the conception that traditional ways of delivering political news were largely intended for old people. In order to stimulate their interest in politics, young people believed that something had to change in the way news is delivered.

5.8. Level of agreement with statements related to the political activity and political values among the youth

Towards the end of the survey respondents were confronted with several statements, asking them to say if they agree with them or not (Figure 61).

Figure 61: Political values among youth



For example, several statements focused on the views of young people towards political parties and politicians. The findings again confirmed that young people are cynical and fairly sceptical of the work of political parties

and the performance of politicians. Namely, 63% of respondents agreed that *'All political parties are the same'*, while only 35% agreed that *'Politicians do more good than bad for young people'*.

A somewhat positive result is that 59% of young people disagreed with the statement that *'Politics is politicians' concern which young people should not meddle in'*. At the same time, the fact that 35% agreed with the statement must not be neglected either. Another potentially encouraging sign is that 60% of young people in the country disagreed that *'It is wiser for young people to keep their opinions about political developments to themselves than to publicly express them'*. This means that the majority of young people are prepared to publicly voice their opinions about politics. Again, however, the fact that almost one-third (32%) of all respondents felt that it is better to keep their political opinions to themselves speaks volumes about the political climate in the country.

Other statements touched upon the political values and political openness nurtured by the youth. In one of them, respondents were asked to say if they agree with the statement that *'LGBT people should not have a place in politics'*. A shocking 59% of young people agreed with this statement. The agreement was lowest for respondents in the age group 15-18 (38%)⁵, and highest for those between the age of 30-35 (63.3%). Ethnic Albanians were in much more agreement with this statement compared to ethnic Macedonians and other ethnic groups (81.5% and 51.5% respectively). Female respondents expressed a slightly lesser agreement with this statement compared to male respondents, however, this difference was not statistically significant.

Another statement asked respondents if they agree that *'Men are better politicians than women'*. Disappointingly, 35.3% of all respondents were in agreement with the statement. Rather surprisingly the percentage of female respondents that agreed with the statement was not as low as we expected – standing at 30.5% compared to 39.6% for men. The agreement with this statement was the lowest among the age group 15-18 (19.5%) which is a half lower than for the 25-29 and 30-35 age groups (39%). Ethnic Albanians (56.2%) were in higher agreement with the statement compared to ethnic Macedonians (27.9%) and other ethnic groups (40.5%).

As far as activism is concerned, 71% of respondents agreed with the statement that *Nowadays, online activism is more important than offline*

⁵ The percentage of don't know was the highest among 15-18-year olds (41.4) and substantially higher than for other age groups.

activism. This finding points to the fact that young people think of political engagement differently, focusing on new forms of participation in political life such as the ones taking place online via social media. At the same time, only 31% agreed that *Things can be changed only by means of a revolution*. Again, what this finding confirms is that young people in the country find online activism increasingly more important, and see change being possible not just by means of a revolution. It would have been an interesting figure to see how young people who participated in the Colourful Revolution would respond to this question. However, as we did not include a question on activism in particular movements, the answer to such question will be left for subsequent studies to address.

Finally, respondents were asked to say if they agree with the statement that *Our country needs a leader with a firm hand*. Agreement around this statement was by far the highest: strikingly, 84% of all respondents agreed that the country needs a leader with a firm hand.

As we were struck by the extremely high demand for a leader with a firm hand, we tackled this issue in greater depth during the focus group. In scientific literature, the desire for a strong political leader is often mentioned as an indication of an authoritarian political culture and outlook on politics. In our case, some of the ways in which the ‘ideal leader’ was described by participants in the focus groups may suggest rising support for a more authoritarian version of a leader. At the same time, several participants believed that firm-hand leaders are compatible with democracy, suggesting that they would support a strong leader only within a democratic system.

What unfortunately proved difficult to understand from the discussions in the focus groups were the factors that shape such a high preference for a firm leader among the youth. What therefore remains to be looked at more closely in subsequent studies is





6 Conclusions

Research into sociopolitical engagement among youth has received considerable attention across established democracies. However, similar studies are much fewer across the Post-Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, especially in new democracies on the periphery such as North Macedonia – where the present research was carried out. With this in mind we hope that our extensive study succeeded (at least partially, if not fully) in providing an in-depth overview of young people's perceptions on several key issues: their view on sociopolitical developments in the country and the position of young people in society; their outlooks on the future of the country and its EU perspective; their confidence in the work of authorities, as well as their ability to personally impact and participate in institutional decision-making processes; their level of sociopolitical activism and participation in different forms of it; their participation in elections and interest in political party membership; the sources of information and the general interest in political developments; and their political values.

We also hope that the empirical evidence gathered in this study, and the recommendations that will follow, will not just raise attention to the importance of discussing matters that influence the lives of youth, but also lead to actual improvement in certain areas. If this study could succeed in generating novel insight on the circumstances faced by youth and at the same time, inject new themes in policy discussions on youth, this would be an extremely valuable contribution as well. In other words, our imperative is to encourage new conversations on the topic which have either been overlooked or ignored.

We arrived at several key conclusions and recommendations about young people's situation from our findings.

Firstly, young people are by and large excluded from the decision-making process at both central and local level and feel that they have an extremely limited impact on the operations of the authorities. They are left frustrated and with a general mood of powerlessness. Their voices and opinions are rarely heard, and effective youth involvement is missing. This clearly points to the fact that institutions are not open to young people's concerns and interests.

The inevitable result of such marginalisation is that young people are distrustful and quite cynical about how politics operate in the country, as well as the role of political parties. We strongly believe that young people's alienation from, and cynicism about politics and sociopolitical engagement, should be interpreted as a result of exclusion and disenfranchisement, rather than simply attributed to ignorance, apathy or immaturity. In other words, it appears that the lack of sociopolitical participation of youth in the country

has more to do with their perception about being excluded from politics and society and less to do with their lack of interest and understanding of the importance of activism.

In this respect, authorities at all levels - and not just those within local and central government, but also institutions such as schools, universities and other places that young people inhabit - should take actions to re-develop their decision-making processes in such a way that is able to mobilise young people in a meaningful way so that their role and power becomes more and more visible in the future. Young people's genuine participation and engagement in sociopolitical processes should be seen as a 'condition sine qua non' for the well-being and the future prospects of our democracy. In this context, the success of democracy needs, among other things, to be measured by the public's participation in the processes of decision-making and the level of responsiveness of the system to popular demand. Hence, it becomes even more important for youth participation to be firmly anchored as a democratic policy principle rather than a mere technique.

Secondly, what is also evident from the findings is that young people have a rather poor opinion of politicians and politics overall. Remarkably, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, this negative view does not seem to have diverted the Macedonian youth from traditional forms of political participation such as voting. In fact, the data suggests that young people, although uninspired by, or even sceptical of, politics and politicians are more than sufficiently interested in voting – hence, in part dispelling the myth that they are politically lazy. This observation contrasts starkly with the sweeping assessments of decreasing voter turnout and electoral apathy among the youth that is so widespread today globally. Moreover, what is perhaps even more paradoxical is that young people in the country tend to vote even though they do not believe in the power of their vote. In other words, young people are clearly predisposed to the idea of elections, although generally frustrated that the outcomes appear to provide them with little opportunity to influence the world around them.

The challenge for those in power is, therefore, to be more responsive to the needs and interest of young people, and more committed to keeping election promises. What is also important is for political elites to offer more realistic sociopolitical expectations. Indeed, if expectations are raised and then unmet, this will only serve to increase youth apathy and cynicism. As evident from the findings, many young people expressed high hopes about North Macedonia joining the EU in just a few years' time. This could be taken as a positive sign in the sense that it is likely to increase the pressure on authorities to focus on this issue as a top priority. However, in a more pessimistic scenario,

if authorities do not succeed in bringing the country closer to the EU and meeting the expectation of young people a lurking danger is that there will likely be disturbing consequences, particularly around migration and brain-drain.

Thirdly, it is evident that young people are neither particularly interested in following political developments in the country, nor particularly interest in being active via political parties, or even citizen organizations for that matter. This should not come as a great surprise if we consider that the young people are profoundly disappointed with conventional politics, with traditional civil organisations and social movements, and with the logic of power and institutionalisation more broadly. Hence, much remains to be done to strengthen youth political and civic participation across different forms and contexts.

So, what can be done to encourage young people to be more socially active and to spark their interest in and engagement with politics? The answer seems to relate to several areas. If young people are to become more interested in society and politics, they need to be persuaded that these subjects have greater relevance within their lives. Among other things, this means that politics and social activism need to be delivered in a more enjoyable and entertaining way than at present. They need to be framed, in schooling and the media, in style and terms which resonate with the issues and concerns of young people. The vocabulary used needs to be easy to understand, using words which are simple and devoid of jargon and technical language, but without patronising. This amounts to nothing less than a paradigmatic shift in viewing, delivering and practising politics, democracy and participation as they relate to young people. As evident from the findings, online activism as a mode of expression is more appealing to young people which suggests that traditional arrangements and forms of activism are becoming less relevant for contemporary youth.

Fourthly, the findings illustrate that some of the political value orientations of the youth are troubling the fact that a significant share of the youth saw no place in politics for LGBT people should not be taken lightly. An equally worrying issue is that a sizable share of respondents believed that men are better suited for politics than women, creating a harmful impression that success in politics depends on gender rather than knowledge and experience. A sign of encouragement is that the youngest respondents in our sample (between the age of 15-18) were more liberal in their views and less supportive of old political stereotypes. In this respect care should be taken, through education and other means (e.g. campaigns), to ensure that such views are reduced to a minimum.



7 Specific recommendations for stakeholders

To public institutions working with youth

1. In order to keep young people on the list of priorities, the Government should institutionalise thematic Government sessions on Youth as a practice. These sessions should take place on a regular basis, at least twice per year. Sessions should reflect on the implementation of conclusions from previous ones, to ensure implementation of recommendations;
2. To ensure proper and timely implementation and to allocate adequate resources for the implementation of the National Youth Strategy and its action plans, the Government should conduct regular implementation assessment meetings, in addition to monitoring and producing evaluation reports;
3. In order to create a commitment of institutions towards youth, institutions that implement policies of youth's interest should appoint an official position dealing with youth affairs. These officials should be responsible for coordinating youth activities with other institutions and coordinating and reporting on activities related to the national youth strategy;
4. To boost the development of youth civil society, the Government and Agency of Youth and Sport (AYS) should provide funding and support to youth organizations and initiatives. The funding dedicated to youth organisations should include institutional financial support and cost-share funding;
5. To contribute to fact-based policymaking, the Government through its ministries and agencies should dedicate financial resources to support research on issues that affect youth in different areas. These areas should focus (but not limited to) youth aspects in education, health care, employment, economic policies, social inclusion, social policies, access to services etc.;
6. To empower students to be consulted and take part in decision making in their schools, the Ministry of Education and Science should propose changes in the Law on Secondary Education, guaranteeing the right to high-school organising and providing students with the right to be present in the decision-making bodies in their schools;

7. The AYS should establish mechanisms for coordination among institutions implementing youth policies and create a coordinative body between institution representatives that will ensure cooperation and mainstreaming of youth policies through regular meetings;
8. The AYS should drastically increase the funds in the budget for the sector youth. The AYS should strive to achieve more even distribution between the funds for the sectors Sport and Youth, by raising the Youth budget to the level of Sport;

To Parliament

9. In order to better represent the needs of young people and develop better legislation based on evidence, the Club of MPs for Youth Issues and Policies should introduce practice of involving young people in discussions about their issues and assess their needs through consultative meetings, public hearings, oversight hearings, study visits and other tools and approaches;
10. In order for the Parliament to ensure continuity of the existence of the Club of MPs for Youth Issues and Policies in the future terms, the Parliament should support the creation of institutional memory for the Club by providing technical and administrative support, by the example of the Woman Caucus;
11. The Parliament should adopt a Law on Youth Organising and Participation, ensure adequate resources for its implementation are planned in the State Budget and conduct continuous oversight on its implementation;
12. In order to put more focus on youth-related laws and policies, the Parliament should consider establishing a Committee on Youth, allowing clear and dedicated responsibility towards the youth-related issues;

- 13.** In order to ensure that youth policies are properly implemented, and provide the envisioned results, the Parliament should conduct more intensive oversight over legislation affecting young people. The Parliament should also encourage coordination and cooperation among different institutions working on youth through hearings dedicated to youth issues;
- 14.** In order to better inform and educate young people about the work of the Parliament, the Parliamentary Institute's Unit of Education and Communication should seek out ways to increase its outreach to youth and students, educational institutions, organisations and clubs;
- 15.** The Parliament should develop a programme for the inclusion of young people in its work. This can be done in ways such as: providing the parliament as an open space for hosting and organising youth events; hosting study visits to parliament, creating an internship programme, bringing in young people to shadow MPs, and other activities.

To educational institutions

- 16.** In order to create space for students to participate in their educational institutions, schools should establish high school organisations within all schools, give students a seat for discussion in the decision-making bodies and support the participation of students in the educational process through providing facilities, funds and support to hold meetings, propose ideas and organise activities;
- 17.** Higher education institutions should establish Student Parliaments at universities and faculties based on the requirements of the Law on Higher Education. This should be done through the organisation of democratic and open elections, embracing the equal participation of students in decision making and the academic community;

18. To ensure the educational process supports the democratic development of students, schools should promote the concept of civic education in curriculum and the overall educational process through quality content in the civic education-related subjects, extracurricular content and activities, with an emphasis of civic engagement, democracy and activism;
19. To ensure quality activities are offered to students, schools should be open for and support the non-formal education in the educational institutions that could contribute to the wellbeing and civic education of students. Schools should nurture cooperation with CSOs and other stakeholders from the private sector in terms of supporting youth participation;
20. To bridge the gap between youth and institutions, schools should encourage young people to be introduced and in contact with institutions and their work, through study visits, guest lectures and other activities;
21. To support the creation of youth policy and quality of discourse on youth issues, higher education institutions and particularly institutes should produce research on youth and related fields of their interest;

To municipalities

22. In order to create possibilities for increased youth participation at the local level, municipalities should establish Local Youth Councils as bodies for political participation of young people. The councils should be established in a democratic and inclusive manner and by allowing young people to select their representatives;
23. Municipalities should provide spaces for local youth organisations, student bodies, clubs, non-formal groups and youth initiatives to develop and conduct their work and programmes and advance youth participation;

- 24. Municipalities should develop local youth strategies and implement them in a conscious and meaningful way, accompanied by sufficient resources and quality evaluation and monitoring;
- 25. To ensure institutional commitment to youth issues, municipalities should appoint an official position dealing with youth affairs. These officials should be responsible for the coordination of youth activities, implementation of local youth strategy, support of the local youth council and other youth-related activities;

To political parties and youth wings

- 26. To adequately address youth issues, political parties should include policies for youth in their programmes. During the developing of programmes and determining policy positions political parties should consult the young people;
- 27. As vessels for creation of young political leaders, political party youth wings should get a more prominent role in the political parties and be encouraged to provide proposals and ideas of how the party should address youth issues;
- 28. Political party youth wings should serve as places for building political knowledge, dialogue, participation and youth engagement in political parties and society. This should be done by allowing the youth wings to create and implement their own programmes, organising activities with youth, hosting consultations, producing research and developing policies;
- 29. In order for political parties to be able to produce more relevant and evidence-based youth policies, party research institutes should conduct research and provide analysis of the needs and perceptions of young people;
- 30. Political parties should guarantee that sufficient funds are dedicated towards the political party youth wings, providing them with adequate resources to operate and fostering their autonomy;

- 31.** Political parties should ensure that young people have opportunities to be represented on their political party election lists at parliamentary and local elections, as a precondition to becoming more politically involved;

To civil society organisations

- 32.** To ensure practising participation within their own structures, civil society organisations should involve young people and their constitutes in their work, development of projects and programmes and advocacy efforts;
- 33.** Civil society organisations should consider improving their openness and accessibility towards young people as new members or beneficiaries and their possibilities for involvement and decision-making within the organisations;
- 34.** To reach out to young people in areas where there are fewer engagement opportunities, civil society organisations should ensure providing activities to young people expanding outside the country's capital, such as other cities or rural areas;
- 35.** Civil society organisations should become models and promote equal inclusion and support of young people coming from marginalised groups and disadvantaged backgrounds;

To media

- 36.** As young people are underrepresented in the media sphere, media should provide space for young people to be more present in the media programmes and content and their voices heard;
- 37.** In order to reach out and inform young audiences, media should create content understandable and adapted for young people in terms of forms, topics and language;
- 38.** To make youth issues and initiatives more present in the media through reporting, by having journalists dedicated to youth issues, creating programming sections and products for youth, investigative reporting on youth issues, engaging journalists and other approaches.

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