YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FOR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

DECEMBER, 2019
The Euro-Atlantic Council of Macedonia (ATA Macedonia) is a non-governmental organization established in 1997 in Skopje, which in its existence covers specific strategic area for the Republic of North Macedonia such as the Euro-Atlantic integrations and promotion of the Euro-Atlantic idea and values in our society.

The aim of the research publication is to summarize the results of the 6-month research and to report on the discussions and deliberations as part of the project events, as well as to display the main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

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I would like to praise the conclusion of the historic political agreement for friendship and good neighborly relations between the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria. It is a step forward in fostering our relations, but also in serving as a basis for our future mutual cooperation.

This project that we implement in cooperation with Republic of Bulgaria, entitled "Youth Empowerment for Active Participation in Decision-Making Process", is important instance for our joint struggles to contribute to the enhancement of democracy in both countries, but also, an opportunity to gather experience and knowledge of the benefits of state membership in NATO and the EU, through the success of the Bulgarian example.

Over the years, ATA Macedonia has been striving to include and integrate young people in its activities and initiatives given their adaptability and potential for democracy promotion. The work with young people is one of our key goals knowing the fact that they are the future leaders and they will have the responsibility for the democratic processes in the society. The perspectives and possibilities of engaging youth in upholding NATO values are indisputable. I have, ones again, to affirm the importance of the role that youth plays in spreading and promoting the NATO and EU values, objectives and ideas. Given that the youth is a driving force in every society, it is of great importance to create young leaders and young professionals.

The research that was conducted by the Euro-Atlantic Council of Macedonia showed that we have many advances, but also many challenges ahead in the process of integrating youth in the decision-making.

It is a process that requires all the stakeholders involved, institutionalization of the policies and programs and larger commitment of the young people that should be proactive and persistent in realizing their ideas and objectives. The integration of North Macedonia in the Euro-Atlantic structures can help tremendously in these processes.

I sincerely hope that this publication will provoke debate and discussion and generate ideas on the youth issues, as well as to provide critical information on how the young people can actively participate and contribute in the future decision making processes.
“No country can move forward if it doesn’t include the youth in the decision-making process. Without the youth, our country has no future.”

H.E. Stevo Pendarovski, President of North Macedonia

“The youth has a key role in the process of monitoring of the political decisions as essential factor for democracy development.”

H.E. Rumen Radev, President of Republic of Bulgaria

The youth should and must be involved in decisions that affect them, and a continuous focus on them and their needs is more than necessary in our country.”

Mr. Arber Ademi, Minister of Education of North Macedonia

“When your country is physically in NATO, EU membership will be a much easier task, and the youth will acquire more opportunities.”

Dr. Solomon Passy, Honorary President of Atlantic Club of Bulgaria

“The new youth law that is process of adoption will regulate the essential issues of youth participation and inclusion, and is a step forward in emphasizing the importance of youth participation in the overall political processes”

Mr. Darko Kaevski, Director of the Agency of Youth and Sport of North Macedonia

“The main factor for ensuring better future for young people in Republic of North Macedonia is guaranteeing the rule of law, good neighborly relations and freedom of the media.”

Mr. Angel Angelov, Ambassador of Bulgaria in Republic of North Macedonia

“We should encourage the creative potentials of our youth in order to become proactive citizens and to contribute for the prosperity of our country”

Dr. Rizvan Sulejmani, University Professor

“We need to invest more in civic education, to find more appropriate forms of information sharing and to create a strategy on central level for substantial skills building and career start of young people for future proactive engagement.”

Mr. Ilija Djugumanov, YATA President/Project Director

“Each society should endeavor to provide better conditions for enhancing the youth participation through diversification of the mechanisms for inclusion, promotion of participatory culture and development of proactive youth-centric policies.”

Marija Jankuloska, Research Coordinator at ATA Macedonia.
1. INTRODUCTION

The youth is an important segment and valuable asset which has a potential to contribute for the society's progress and development. Skilled, professional and advanced youth has a capacity to bring many benefits to society. Therefore, the active and engaged youth in the social and political processes is highly important and is a prerequisite for their personal development, but also for enabling the prosperity of their community. On one hand, the young people in every country should play an important role in the processes for enhancing democracy by the means of participation and engagement, i.e. enabling the prosperity of the country itself. On the other hand, each country or society is responsible for providing necessary mechanisms for mainstreaming the youth component in decision making.

The complex structure of the society is composed of various aspects of human behavior, efforts and actions for the purpose of the citizens' well-being. The population is the bearer of all activities, so its structure is very important for the functioning of the social community in its future endeavors. The youth is part of that structure and one of the most important factors for the good prospects of the community. Hence, each society invests part of its capacities in healthy, educated and active youth, which will be the bearer of the future needs of that society in economic, social, political and cultural terms.

The role of young people in society is considerable and significant, since they are agents of new, fresh ideas and with their traits and characteristics they are actually a vehicle of positive changes in achieving their own goals, but also the wider goals of the community that moves the society forward in a more effective and more functional way. Therefore, the role of young people in society must not be overlooked or underestimated; and thus, it is necessary and important for them to be actively involved in the society and decision-making processes.

Therefore, the inclusion of young people in the decision-making processes should be a priority for any government, which through the institutions, especially the educational, local self-government and the non-governmental sector will encourage and stimulate these processes. Raising awareness that every single voice is important for a better tomorrow should be the impetus of all the actors that work with or for the benefit of the young people.

Youth involvement in politics and political activities is a prerequisite for the development of democratic processes. Achieving the high standards of good governance and democracy is a long process that requires all the stakeholders involved, as well as the young people with their vision and new ideas. The youth represents significant factor in defining the progressiveness of a society, and its potential is reflected in the ability to integrate the youth element in the decision making processes. Arguably, the more the society invests in the growth and development of young people, the more it will produce skillful, proactive and conscious youth capable to instigate significant societal and political changes intrinsic for the democratic development.
2. ACTION OVERVIEW

**General Objective:** Empowering and encouraging greater participation of young people in decision-making processes for enhancing the Euro-Atlantic integrations in the Republic of North Macedonia.

**Specific Objective:** Developing the capacities of the young people to actively engage in decision-making processes through youth mobility and cooperation between the youth and policy makers of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia.

The historic agreement for friendship and good neighborly relations between the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria once again emphasized the role of youth cooperation and the need for mobility and participation between the two countries in order to learn from the experience of the Republic of Bulgaria in the decision-making process as a multi-year member-state of the EU and NATO.

In the light of such co-operation and in order to share experiences and best practices, the Euro-Atlantic Council of Macedonia and the Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria in Skopje launched a project entitled: “Youth Empowerment for Active Participation in Decision-Making Process” aimed at contributing in building youth capacities and future leaders and policy makers in support of the democratic values, good governance and the inclusion of the wider society in decision-making processes in the country.

The project aimed to map the problems and challenges for youth participation in North Macedonia, to offer comparative insights with the youth inclusion in Bulgaria (as integrated country in the Euro-Atlantic structures) and to address the main issues through discussions, comparative analysis and recommendations. The project, also, was directed at raising the public awareness of the benefits of state membership in NATO and the EU, through the success of the Bulgarian example.

The long-term objective of this action was to empower and encourage greater youth participation in the decision-making processes by developing capacities for active and effective engagement of the youth and by fostering greater youth mobility and cooperation. Besides this, the action was aimed at raising awareness on NATO and EU and to lead toward positive attitude about the promotion of the Euro-Atlantic values.

1. Research and Analysis - The research was designed to explore the political practices of inclusion of youth in the decision making process and the role of the media in the promotion of diversity in democratic processes. It strived to examine the political and legal instruments in both North Macedonia and Bulgaria and to offer comparative insights on the political and legal setup that facilitate the youth participation in the decision making processes in both countries.

2. Three-day study visit - The purpose of the study visit was practical learning from the experience of the representatives of the institutions and organizations, exchange of ideas and experiences through debates with the youth in this field in the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as implementing cultural and educational dimension. It was also aimed to generate knowledge, to develop dialogue between Macedonian youth and the representatives of the Bulgarian institutions, and to address the questions of their common interest.
3. Final Conference including Round table discussion – The final conference was organized for presenting the results of the six-month research, raising questions on youth participation and discussing the challenges and the barriers that impact the youth engagement. The discussion round table was envisioned to bring together young people, policy makers and other relevant stakeholders in order to discuss the issues of interest concerning equal opportunities for participation, inclusion and cooperation.

4. Research Publication and Info Manual – The info manual is aimed at raising awareness and increasing information on the key youth terms, comparative situational framework in North Macedonia and Bulgaria and the perceptions of young people in North Macedonia. The aim of the research publication is to summarize the results of the research and discussions and to display the main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used a combination of secondary data and first-hand evidence. The secondary data collection was opted for comparative overview of the existing mechanisms for youth participation in decision making processes in North Macedonia and Bulgaria, but also for providing insights on the primary actors and stakeholders in charge, the existing strategies and action plans and legal documents that cover and regulate the issue of youth participation. The aim was to assess the situational setup and to draw comparisons on the differences and commonalities regarding the youth-oriented policies and how the Euro-Atlantic integrations shaped the youth policy practices. Furthermore, the study sets out to examine the youth policies in North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to address the biggest challenges that accompany their implementation.

The second phase of the research was dedicated to gathering and content analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) of media texts and news articles from different local media outlets in North Macedonia in order to assess how the media in North Macedonia approach the issue of youth participation and to evaluate the level of interest of the media for youth issues.

The last phase employed quantitative research and analysis of online questionnaires that were distributed via social media platforms and through e-mail alerts. The online questionnaires employed ‘non-probability’ sampling approach corroborated by snowball techniques. The questions were in the form of close-ended questions, rating-scale questions and multi-variable questions which allowed the researchers to get varied results on diverse youth issues.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Preliminary Research

Youth Participation in the Decision-Making Process

The youth participation can be defined as a power of youth to influence the political decisions in a manner to improve their way of living and their opportunities in their country or community. The youth policies can be construed as set of tools for promoting the involvement of young people in decision-making processes and the opinion-shaping structures, but also to facilitate the modes for information how they can be involved. Youth is critical for democratic development in every country, thus the incentives for encouragement of youth participation are crucial for effective and constructive decision-making process.
The importance of youth participation in the decision-making process is affirmed and acknowledged in numerous international and regional documents often identified as central and vital for the progress and development of democracy.

For instance, the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth passed by the UN General Assembly in 1995 contains guidelines and proposals for national measures for improvement of youth policies and covers fifteen youth priority areas.

On regional level, it is stated in the Preamble of the 2003 Council of Europe's "Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life", that “Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engaging in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society”.

The European Commission's White Paper gives rise to the importance of volunteerism as a form and a tool for achieving greater participation, noting that youth volunteerism is "an educational experience and a factor in employability and integration". The Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes is a step ahead in encouraging development of national youth policies and operational programmes in order to ensure active youth participation and national youth development.

The participation should be meaningful and sustained in order to be considered effective and impactful for the community. The Canadian Mental Health Association in 1995 defined meaningful youth participation as one that "involves recognizing and nurturing the strengths, interests, and abilities of young people through the provision of real opportunities for youth to become involved in decisions that affect them at individual and systemic levels".

In this regard, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)'s reports (conducted in 2014 and 2016 respectively based on the resolution "Youth participation in the democratic process" adopted at 122nd Assembly in Bangkok, in 2010 ) suggest that political participation by young people is "a crucial new focus of efforts to enhance democracy worldwide".

The participation can be realized in different forms and procedures ranging from voting in elections and membership in political parties (representative democracy) to participation in youth organizations or NGOs and in volunteering activities (participatory democracy).

The level of the youth engagement is influenced by both geographical and socio-economic factors. In both countries, which are in the focus of this study, there are several challenges that hinder, slow down or adversely affect youth participation. These challenges can be classified as socio-demographic (e.g. the socio-economic background, education, gender, ethnicity) or structural (lack of effective regulatory and political mechanisms, lack of appropriate incentives, lack of information and information campaigns). The under-employment, the socio-economic and the political exclusions are the most common challenges the youth is faced with on regular level. The civic engagement is considered low as indicated in numerous reports.

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4 The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), 1995
5 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), “Youth participation in national parliaments”, 2014
The forms of participation can vary, as well as the modes through which that participation can be realized. The participation can appear in a form of youth councils at local and national level, youth or student organizations, cross-sectorial working groups, consultations with youth during the decision making process and various types of cooperation between youth and institutions. The young people could be either consulted or informed or to be more directly involved through youth-led initiatives.

Many problems in a form of tokenism can arise that can be explained as symbolic and declarative efforts to increase diversity in decision making. The tokenism is well-represented in many forms and is usually difficult to be detected at first hand. Arguably, the tokenistic practices which ostensibly stimulate youth inclusion without genuine impact over the decision-making have potential to undermine the true participation and representation.

The other issues and difficulties that affect youth in general in both countries are mostly the high level of youth unemployment. According to the report conducted after the study visit that had took place in Bulgaria by European Youth Forum in 2005 (two years before Bulgaria have become full-fledged EU member state) the youth unemployment was identified as one of the biggest issues in Bulgaria. The “Youth Unemployment in Bulgaria” paper also highlights the challenges imposed by the youth labor market in Bulgaria.

As for North Macedonia, the official data (based on the information of the latest estimates of the population, extracted from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia), suggest that the unemployment rate in North Macedonia is 22.1 % of the total population. According to a research conducted by Reactor, concerning the youth position in the labor market in North Macedonia, 22, 6 % of the young people in North Macedonia are declared as unemployed; 18, 3 % as employed; 41, 2 % of them as still a part of the educational process, while the others were declared as focused on other types of activities.

Based on previous researches, the other youth issues identified in North Macedonia are the following: the poor and inefficient educational system which contributes to socially lethargic and inactive youth, the lack of credible representative bodies transpiring from the youth as subset of population and the youth organizations that exist independently, without greater mutual cooperation, common platforms and initiatives.

National legal and political framework

a) Bulgaria

Bulgaria, which has been integrated in the Euro-Atlantic structures for a longer period, has well developed mechanisms for encouraging youth participation, as well as established bodies specializing in the implementation of youth policies.

The National Youth Strategy (2010 – 2020) is the most prominent document that regulates the status of young people in Bulgaria and covers the issue of youth engagement and participation.

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It is “oriented towards building and implementing a unified, consistent and sustainable youth policy in Bulgaria, based on multi-sectoral approach, inter-sectoral collaboration and joint management with young people at national, regional, provincial, municipal level”.\textsuperscript{11} It also affirms the importance of non-formal education and the youth “participation in social and economic life and in governance at local, regional and national level”.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, the Strategy accentuates that multi-sectoral approach to youth policy is crucial for achievement of the long-term goals set in the Strategy.\textsuperscript{13}

The Draft Implementation Plan (2011 Annual Action Plan) of the National Youth Strategy (2010 – 2020) is a practical tool to recap, sketch and facilitate the activities and programs as outlined in the National Youth Strategy.

The Youth Act (Youth Law) is the national youth law that defines the key principles and standards for youth participation. It defines the state policies on youth as “purposeful and consistent activity of the state, municipalities, youth organizations and society, which aims to create favorable conditions for the full personal development of young people and their participation in the social and economic life, as well as their involvement in the management on local, regional and national level through activities encouraging the development of young people in the country.”\textsuperscript{14}

b) North Macedonia

So far, in North Macedonia there are various projects and initiatives by youth-run organizations and governmental youth strategies on local and national level that deal with the issues that affect youth participation, local youth engagement, formal and non-formal education. However, the established practices in Macedonia, the lack of awareness and the general challenges of youth in the decision-making process illustrate the current social and political setup in North Macedonia.

On national level in North Macedonia, with respect to the political framework, this topic is covered by the National Youth Strategy (2016-2025), and local strategies for youth participation. The Action Plan is the operational document intended to serve the process of implementation of the National Youth Strategy, while the Agency of Youth and Sport is an independent body which is responsible for the implementation of the strategy. The National Youth Strategy sets out four strategic priorities concerning youth: better standard of living and equal opportunities, education and personal development, systematic integration of different categories of youth, and youth participation in monitoring and implementing policies and decisions affecting them. The National Youth Strategy sets out the basic principles and guidelines for action for all actors in the society, and in this strategy the term “young people” refers to any person(s) between the age of 15 and 29.

Other important documents are the Strategy on education (2018-2025) with its Action Plan and the Specific Action Plan (2016 – 2020) for Youth Employment.

As regards the legal framework, there is not adopted any national Youth Law in North Macedonia although many failed initiatives were developed over the years. The youth issues are indirectly regulated in other laws such as the Law on Secondary Education, Law on Higher Education, Law on Student Standard, and the Law on Volunteerism. Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies is in the process of adoption with intention to fill out the legal void regarding the ungoverned youth issues.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid
Key actors and stakeholders

a) Bulgaria

On institutional level, the responsibility for implementation of the national youth policies and programs resides upon the Youth Directorate within the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

In Bulgaria, the Youth Policies Directorate within the Ministry of Youth and Sports is the body that is in charge of delivering and implementing national youth policies and programs. The Directorate has diverse responsibilities among which to assist the process of planning and implementation of the national youth policies; to assist the development of normative and strategic documents concerning youth; to prepare, coordinate and implement projects and initiatives for youth activities, etc.\(^\text{15}\)

There are also inter-ministerial working groups whose responsibility resides upon specific youth issues.\(^\text{16}\)

The Public Council on Youth Matters within the Minister of Youth and Sports, the Committee on children, youth and sport matters within the Parliament and the National Advisory Council on youth matters also deal with the issue of youth participation.

b) North Macedonia

The Agency of Youth and Sport (AYS) is a governmental entity which deals with youth issues and contributes for greater youth standard. It exists independently from the Governmental bodies and consists of three departments: the Department for Sports; the Department for Normative, Legal and Economic Issues; and the Department for Youth.

The other bodies that tackle with the youth questions in North Macedonia are the National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility, the National Youth Council of Macedonia, the Local Youth Councils and the local representative structures within the Local Self-Government and the Club for youth issues and policies (composed of members of all parliament parties).

The National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility is a public institution that is primarily focused on furthering the European educational programs in the Republic of North Macedonia. The Local Youth Councils have advisory role in the local municipalities, but also they are mechanism for influence the decisions on local level.

4.2. Media Content Analysis

The media role in shaping the public perception on youth participation is indisputable, thus, by the means of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, sample of media articles was collated and analyzed. This analysis is based on the assumption that the media has an essential role in encouraging the youth participation by promoting self-expression and active engagement with its capacity to provide prominence of the youth issues and to accentuate the salience of youth participation.

\(^{15}\) See, За дирекция „Младежки политики”, available at http://nism.bg/bg/pages/For-Directorate-Youth-Policies.html

With the aim of investigating the media coverage of youth participation, several traditional media outlets were considered. Six TV channels (Sitel, Telma, 24 Vesti, Alsat, Alfa, MTV and Kanal 5) and three Internet portals (Libertas, Net Press, Plus Info) were subject of the analysis.

The Method of Content Analysis was applied during the analysis in order to assess how the media report on youth issues, what is the level of media interest in promoting youth participation and what kind of narratives are utilized in the media reporting process. The results are articulated descriptively and with graphic displays.

As indicative of the media articles, both positive and negative representation is often utilized in media narratives, with negative rhetoric that dominates over the positive. The youth itself is frequently depicted in a negative connotation with an emphasis on youth involvement in crime, accidents and other wrongdoings or represented as a part of moral decay with lack of social responsibility.

The youth engagement in civic and political life, as observed by the media articles, is portrayed in a positive light, as a national asset and valuable benefit for the society. The focus of the media when it comes to youth participation is the informative and factual transmission of messages about youth consultative meetings, project participation and volunteering.

The data culled from the media articles is suggestive of the lack of media interest to report on youth issues in general. Minimal space is dedicated to articles that cover the questions on youth and participation with lack of authentic reporting and original stories. The informative type of articles dominates the media discourse without deeper analysis or investigation. The stereotypical images or prejudgments are less common.

As regards the utilization of quotations, the direct and indirect quotations are utilized equally with the direct quotations slightly prevailing over the indirect.

Some of the heading examples which are used for conveying messages are as following: “The debates on a new law on youth participation and youth policies is about to begin - young people will advise” (24 Vesti); “Youth action on the occasion of the International Day of Peace in Strumica” (24 Vesti); “Youth representation in state institutions far below the European average” (ALSAT); “Conference: Young people do not participate in policy creation at local level” (SITEL); “The Agency for Youth and Sport will provide training for young entrepreneurs” (Kanal 5); “Consultative meetings for joint improvement and implementation of youth policies in the Republic of Macedonia” (KANAL 5), and similar informative headlines.

Regarding the media approach to the issues of youth participation, the quantitative content analysis indicates that the most of the media articles (53%) articulated neutral position when conveying the messages.
4.3. Questionnaires

The online questionnaires employed ‘non-probability’ sampling approach backed by snowball techniques. The questions were in the form of close-ended questions, rating-scale questions and multi-variable questions which allowed the researches to get varied results on diverse youth issues. The first four questions were designed to provide demographic data of the respondents, while the others collated information on youth awareness, perceptions and standpoints regarding the participation opportunities for young people in North Macedonia.
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE RESPONDENTS

GENDER:
- Male: 57%
- Female: 43%

LOCATION:
- Urban: 90%
- Rural: 10%

AGE:
- Category aged 30-35: 22%
- Category aged 25-29: 30%
- Category aged 20-24: 38%
- Category aged 15-19: 10%

ETHNICITY:
- Albanians: 36%
- Macedonians: 59%
- Others: 5%
1. Are you familiar with the forms and modalities for engaging in the decision-making process?

The respondents were asked about their familiarity with the forms and modalities for participation in the decision-making process. 61% of the respondents declared that they are familiar with the forms and modalities for engaging in the decision-making process, 29% said “no”, while 10% did not have opinion.

2. Are you familiar with the activities carried out by your local community / municipality regarding the youth policies and activities?

The second question was intended to explore whether the young people are familiar with the activities carried out by their local community / municipality regarding the youth policies and activities or they are not. Most of the respondents (48%) are familiar are familiar with the youth activities carried out by their local community / municipality, 44% said that they are not familiar with, while 8% had no defined position.
3. On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you think the youth participation have capacity to make difference or to change the course of policy making positively?

This question whether the youth participation have capacity to make difference or to change the course of policy making positively was formulated as Likert scale with 5 as positive and 1 as negative end. The prevalent answer in this respect was the answer numbered 3 (28%) with the answer numbered 5 (mostly agree) slightly behind it.

4. On a scale from 1 to 5, how do you assess the availability/effectiveness of information about how to participate in decision-making?

The dominant view of the young people about the availability/effectiveness of information about how to participate in decision-making is ranked 3 (38 % of the respondents).
5. In your opinion, what are the biggest issues/challenges that hinder the youth participation/engagement in decision making?

As a multi-variable question, it provided the respondents opportunity to select three biggest issues issues/challenges that hinder the youth participation/engagement in decision making process in North Macedonia. Most of the respondents identified the socio-economic factors (49%) as major impediments to youth participation. The other issues ranked by the young people are as follows: lack of civic education (47%), individual factors (46%), lack of information on how to participate (45%), inadequate programs and policies on local and national level (41%), tokenism or the symbolic involvement of youth in decision-making (33%) and the demographic factors (15%).

6. How do you usually inform yourself regarding the opportunities for participation?

The second multi-variable question provided the respondents with the opportunity to select more than one option regarding how they usually inform themselves regarding the opportunities for participation. The most circled answer was social media (92 %). The other identified sources of information are the following: internet Sites (56%), e-mail alerts (27%), youth services/info centers (20%), traditional media (16%), leaflets or other outdoor media (4%) and other sources (2%).
7. In your opinion, are there enough opportunities for youth involvement in decision-making processes in North Macedonia?

The highest share of the young people (62%) believe that there aren’t enough opportunities for youth involvement in decision-making processes in North Macedonia. 25% of them think the opposite, while the 13% don’t have an opinion.

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4. STUDY VISITS

As part of the project, in the period from 1st to 3rd of October 2019, ATA Macedonia organized a three-day working/study visit in the Republic of Bulgaria where young people aged 18-30 participated (following a call issued by ATA Macedonia) and where they had several study visits to state and non-state institutions including: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria, Cabinet of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria.

The official call for participation was published on 5 September 2019 on ATA website and was distributed on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) for greater visibility. It was followed by strong social media campaign.

Participants of the study visit were 15 young people aged 18-30, either undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students or young professionals employed in state and non-state institutions, as well as young people with experience in youth policy making. There were participants from the Faculty of Philology “Blazhe Koneski”-Skopje, International Balkan University – Skopje, Faculty of Law “Iustinianus Primus” – Skopje, Faculty of Economics – Skopje and South East European University – Skopje. In addition, the working visit was also attended by representatives of ATA Macedonia and Mr. Ismet Ramadani, the President of ATA Macedonia.
The purpose of the visit was practical learning from the experience of the representatives of these institutions and organizations, exchange of ideas and experiences through debates with the youth in this field in the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as cultural and educational dimension. The implementation of the study visit, which included issues that largely affect young people and students, achieved high level of interest, but also raised the level of awareness about the importance of engaging young people in decision-making processes in both countries.

**Opening and Roundtable**

The opening of the event featured the opening speeches by Mr. Ivan Naydenov, Permanent State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria and Mr. Ismet Ramadani, President of ATA Macedonia. The moderator of the opening event was Mr. Ilija Djugumanov, member of the Presidency of ATA Macedonia and Project Director, who provided a brief overview of the project objectives and the need for such initiative for both countries in the specific social and political context.

**Mr. Ivan Naydenov**, Permanent State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, outlined the problems and challenges for the young people in Bulgaria, the importance of youth initiatives and the cooperation between the two countries to overcome these challenges.

**Mr. Ismet Ramadani**, President of ATA Macedonia, pointed to the historic political agreement on friendship and good neighborly relations between the Republic of Northern Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria as a step forward in fostering our relations, but also as a basis for future mutual cooperation between the two countries. He also encouraged the young participants to become more involved and to actively participate in the political processes and policies in our country.

The opening of the event was in the form of roundtable where participants of the event also discussed about the current issues related to youth participation including existing policies and mechanisms, limiting factors and modes to overcome them, the issue of tokenism, and the need for greater youth activity in every aspect of the functioning of the society.
Study Visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria

During the first day of the visit of Bulgaria, the participants visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria where they met with the diplomatic team and the Directors for NATO, International Relations and Southeast Europe, as well as the representatives of the Ministry’s Diplomatic Institute. The speakers, among which Mr. Deyan Katratchev, Director for Southeast Europe and Mr. Stoilkо Yordanоv, from the Direction “Southeast Europe”, introduced the participants with the functions and role of the Ministry in the contemporary Bulgarian policy and diplomatic relations.

During the meeting, the discussion was focused on how the young people can be integrated into the decision-making process and how to ensure greater youth engagement through the active use of digital technology. The issues that were raised during the meeting were the importance of the investment in the strategic communications, the role of social media tools and the communication campaigns for youth engagement and the overall relations among Bulgaria and North Macedonia in terms of cooperation initiatives and NATO membership.

In addition, the participants had unique opportunity to see and tour the premises of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, including the impressive “Black Marble Room”.

![Image of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria](image1.png)

![Image of the meeting](image2.png)

![Image of the tour](image3.png)
President’s Cabinet

During the visit to the President’s Cabinet, the participants met with H.E. Rumen Radev, President of the Republic of Bulgaria. Mr. Rumen Radev emphasized the importance of youth involvement in political decision-making, the importance of Euro-Atlantic integration for North Macedonia in the creation of inclusive institutions and emphasized the key role of youth in the process of monitoring the political decisions as essential for democracy development. He emphasized that the engagement of the whole society is crucial in these processes.

Ms. Veronica Orbetsova, Foreign Policy Advisor, and Ms. Maria Jurkova, Head of the Department for “Strategies, Analysis and Forecasts”, presented the participants the existing initiatives for youth involvement in the political processes in Bulgaria, but also the other existing activities for integration.

Participants had the opportunity to discuss, make suggestions and deliberate upon the challenges of the two countries in terms of youth inclusion. Moreover, they toured the premises of the Presidential Palace in Sofia including the Digital Library where the meeting with the President took place. They also had unique experience to see the changing of the guard ceremony of the National Guards Unit.
Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria

The next working visit took place at the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria, where presentations were made by representatives of the Ministry of Defense and the Department of Human Resources at the Ministry.

Mr. Ilijan Nalbantov, Expert in Security and Defense Policy and Head of the Political Cabinet of the Minister of Defense and Mr. Dimitar Rusev, Chief Expert of the Human Resources Management Directorate, presented the participants with the programs and policies of the Ministry and the perspectives of engaging youth in these processes. Mr. Milen Iliev presented about the military education in Bulgaria, the main categories of studies and about the overall youth interest in military education. During the meeting, the participants had a chance to get familiar with the "Career Start" program for young people in Bulgaria aimed at gaining work experience, the opportunities offered by military education for young people in Bulgaria, as well as an overview of the history and structure of the ministry and the military history of Bulgaria. In addition, the participants toured the Ministry and learned more about the history of the impressive building, the symbols and the monumental statues, as well about the Bulgarian history with the assistance of Ms. Zdravka Evtimova who also provided the participants with an extensive and detailed presentation about Ministry’s history and design.

Atlantic Club of Bulgaria

The last activity, which was part of the working visit of Bulgaria, was the visit of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, an organization that deals with the promotion of Atlantic values in Bulgaria, but also with the active involvement of young people in these processes. At the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria there was a presentation by Amb. Elena Portodorova and Amb. Biserka Benisheva.

Amb. Elena Portodorova, Vice President of the Atlantic Association, outlined the process, the purpose and the challenges of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, existing and past projects, as well as the youth initiatives. Amb. Biserka Benisheva gave a broader overview of the challenges of the Republic of North Macedonia in terms of EU membership and the importance of young people in these processes. The young members of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria presented their initiative “Youth Ambassadors” and described the purpose of the program.

The participants had the opportunity to network with their peers from Bulgaria and exchange experiences on existing problems and challenges for youth in both countries.
5. CONFERENCE FINDINGS

On the occasion of the conclusion of the project entitled "Youth Empowerment for Active Participation in the Decision-Making Process", the Euro-Atlantic Council of Macedonia in cooperation with the Embassy of Republic of Bulgaria organized a Final Conference for presenting the results of the six-month research, raising questions on youth participation and discussing the challenges and the barriers that impact the youth engagement.
The conference consisted of two sessions: the official opening and panel discussion. The keynote speakers at the official opening were Mr. Ismet RAMADANI, President of ATA Macedonia; H.E. Mr. Stevo PENDAROVSKI, President of the Republic of North Macedonia; Dr. Arbr ADEMI, Minister of Education of the Republic of North Macedonia; and Dr. Solomon PASSY, Honorary President of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria.

**Mr. Ismet RAMADANI**, President of ATA Macedonia, noted that this project is an important example of the joint efforts of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria to contribute in the promotion of democracy in both countries, as well as the opportunity to gain experience and understanding of the benefits of Bulgaria’s membership in NATO and the EU, through the success of the Bulgarian example. He sent a message to the Embassies based in North Macedonia to continue their support, as we have no alternative outside NATO and the EU.

**H.E. Mr. Stevo PENDAROVSKI**, President of the Republic of North Macedonia, stated in his address that without creating mechanisms for youth participation in the decision-making process, as well as without encouraging them to actively participate, we cannot expect progress and prosperity for our country. H.E. Mr. Pendarovski added that it is our responsibility to provide better conditions and perspectives for young people in the Republic of North Macedonia, stressing that "without their voice being heard, without their quality participation, without successful youth policies, it will be impossible".

**Dr. Arbr ADEMI**, Minister of Education of the Republic of North Macedonia, pointed out that young people must be involved in the decisions that concern them and that a continuous focus on their needs is needed. He added that education is one of the factors that mostly influence the capacities of each country.

**Dr. Solomon PASSY**, Honorary President of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, emphasized that when the Republic of North Macedonia is full-fledged NATO member, the EU membership will be a much easier task. It would consequently provide more opportunities for youth in the labor market and political incentives for participation.
At the panel discussion, the discussion was held by Mr. Ilija DJUGUMANOV, Project Director and Member of the Presidency of ATA Macedonia; H.E. Mr. Angel ANGELOV, Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria in the Republic of North Macedonia; Mr. Darko KAEVSKI, Director of the Agency of Youth and Sport; Dr Rizvan SULEJMANI, University Professor; and Ms. Maria JANKULOSKA, Research Coordinator at the Euro-Atlantic Council of Macedonia.

Mr. Ilija DJUGUMANOV, Project Director and Member of the Presidency of ATA Macedonia, who also moderated the panel session, explained the goals and activities of the project. He sent a message to policymakers and all responsible actors that we need to invest more in civic education, to find more appropriate forms of information sharing, and to create a skills building strategy for future perspectives of the young people.

H.E. Mr. Angel ANGELOV, Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria in the Republic of North Macedonia, in his speech praised the efforts for contributing to the Euro-Atlantic integration processes and the efforts to integrate young people into these processes.

Mr. Darko KAEVSKI, Director of the Agency of Youth and Sport, outlined the Agency's efforts to enhance youth policies, the new law on youth that is in the process of being adopted and how it regulates the essential issues of youth participation and inclusion, as well as the importance of youth participation in the overall political processes.
Dr. Rizvan SULEJMANI, University Professor, said that young people should make efforts and influence decision making because with their engagement the whole society will have greater prosperity and progress.

Ms. Marija JANKULOSKA, Research Coordinator at the Euro - Atlantic Council of Macedonia, presented the results of the research and outlined the recommendations for future policies that would contribute to more opportunities for young people in the decision-making.
The conference was attended by high-level officials, policy-makers, experts and pundits, representatives from the EU/NATO Embassies in Republic of North Macedonia, civil society, academia and the media, as well as 60 young people with different educational profile. The event was concluded by questions and discussion led the students and young people. The discussion raised issues related to youth unemployment, the brain drain effect and how to increase the opportunities for participation.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The value of youth engagement and participation in decision-making processes can be observed from different prisms and can be equally beneficial for both the community and the individual. On the one hand, it significantly contributes for legitimacy of the decision-making process, as well as for the accountability of the institutions and decision makers. The young people can offer their new and authentic ideas and models for solving local issues, but also to add value to the decision making through youth perspective. On the other hand, it helps young individuals to develop new skills through participation, to understand the principles and importance of democracy and to materialize their talents and potentials. Overall, the youth as a subset of population has enormous potential as a key resource for social progress, but also a category that is crucial to social and economic change in society.

In this regard, it is important particular attention to be dedicated to the following recommendations.

1. **Investing in the quality of education** (both formal and informal) is one of the key factors for building proactive young people that will be skillful and engaged. A special attention should be paid to civic education, vocational training and informational campaigns in order to ensure non-formal engagement of the young people.

2. **The youth-centric policies and the institutionalization of the youth programs** are crucial for creating condition for youth participation and culture of inclusion. Greater youth involvement in developing mechanisms for youth participation is a must, as well as ensuring feedback from the young people.

3. **Diversification of mechanisms for inclusion** is crucial for ensuring varied practices and programs for different youth profiles. With the more diverse approaches, there will be more opportunities for youth to participate in the decision-making.

4. **Nurturing participatory culture and participatory settings.** The information campaigns are vital in the process of raising awareness and understanding, but also to increase knowledge among youth how to be involved in the democratic processes. Various types of online strategies and different and innovative tools should be utilized. The advocacy campaigns should be supported and encouraged in order to stimulate active citizenship since young age.

5. **Reliance on bottom-up approach.** Fostering partnership between youth organizations and policy makers is crucial for enhancing cooperation and for shoring up the initiatives that can be attributed to young people.

6. **Strengthening the legal and political framework** that should be accompanied by extensive dialogue and deliberation, consultations, as well as inclusion of all stakeholders and target groups. The forms of youth association and the status of youth should be legally regulated and well-defined.

7. **Supporting youth-led researches** is highly important to assess the current situational setup and to identify evidence gaps concerning youth policies and their effectiveness in the contemporary socio-political context.
8. The information campaigns are vital in the process of raising awareness and understanding, but also to increase knowledge among youth how to be involved in the democratic processes. Various types of online strategies and different and innovative tools should be used in order to strengthen the information campaigns.

9. The Economic leverage i.e. creating conditions for labor market development that will provide job opportunities for the young people, as well as competitive and thriving environment that will contribute for building skills and career development should be an imperative for the policy makers in order to reduce the impediments to youth participation such as the socio-economic conditions.

10. Each society should strive to provide substantial youth participation which should not be limited to declarative and formal inclusion in the political processes. The tokenism has potential to discourage and to impede the genuine youth capacities to lead to significant political changes and advancement of participatory democracy.
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