

POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE BALKANS

COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS



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ALDA

European Association
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Balkan regional platform for
youth participation and dialogue

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COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS**

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FOREWORD

Balkan Regional Platform for Youth Participation and Dialogue is the project designed to contribute to structuring regional thematic cooperation and coordination between civil society and public authorities in the Western Balkan countries primarily aimed to improve environment for youth activism and participation. The main activities engaging a wide scope of CSOs working for youth and youth groups operating at grass-root level are aimed to create a Balkan Network for Local Democracy comprising CSOs and local/regional authorities.

Main project activities include capacity building and thematic networking in support to social and economic inclusion of age groups that risk marginalisation and in particular youngsters, and are implemented by ALL the Local Democracy Agencies in the Western Balkan countries through structured regional thematic cooperation engaging CSOs and public authorities. Capacity building, creation of a laboratory of knowledge and information share at regional level serve as the main tools to strengthen youth groups for active citizenship and participation in policy / decision making through monitoring the implementation of public policies aimed at EU integration of the Western Balkans. With this in view, the LDAs involved in the action are working together and provide all necessary support to newly appointed Youth Engagement Workers in Youth Info points established within the LDA offices, members of the Regional Youth Working Group and Local Youth Advisory Groups to contribute to achieving the project results.

This publication is the result of extensive field research work carried out by the team of experts, youth workers and the project partner LDA team members: LDA Montenegro, LDA Mostar, LDA Zavidovici, LDA Prijedor, LDA Central and Southern Serbia, LDA Subotica, LDA Kosovo*, ALDA Skopje. Field research, focus group meetings, field and online surveys were conducted in some thirty smaller local communities across the region. Information and feedback collected and comprised in this publication serve as the grounds for furthering advocacy actions of CSOs operating at grass root level to influence more effectively the so much needed legislative and institutional reforms in support to enhanced implementation of youth policies and to furthering the EU integration perspective of the Western Balkans.

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INTRODUCTION

Transitional processes brought forward numerous social, economic, and political challenges to the countries in the Balkans, most of which are still experiencing complex and burdensome transformations even as many as two decades after the conflicts in former Yugoslavia ended.

The breakup of the then socialist country enabling the young generation to play a significant transformative role within the established institutional framework resulted in a vast policy vacuum (dis)regarding young people in the newly created Western Balkan countries. Consequently, **young people in the region became marginalized – socially, economically and politically**, thus becoming one of the most vulnerable social category to a large extent affected by the legacy of the past conflict and delayed transition to democracy.

While realising the **youth capacities** are crucial for building more stable and cohesive societies and being influenced by different national and international stakeholders, decision makers in these newly formed countries across the Balkans **re-established youth policy** mechanisms by adopting relevant policy documents and creating bodies responsible for youth related issues. General purpose of these youth policies was to involve different stakeholders, and provide planned and coordinated measures in order to create conditions and opportunities for young people to develop the knowledge, skills and competences in order to become agents of change and social transformation. This would not be possible to achieve unless there is a certain level of social consensus among those stakeholders.

The opening up of countries in Central, Eastern and Western Europe and their accession as member states to the EU brings new dimension to youth issues. In this context **youth participation** becomes a means for promoting **democracy and active citizenship** (Kovacheva 2001). Aiming to assure meaningful young person's social inclusion, stakeholders are encouraged to include youth in the process of social change at the local level, as well as in a more global society, regardless of their age, class, cultural background, gender identity and sexual orientation, lifestyle, religious and political affiliations, residence and ethnicity, particularly Roma young people and their families (Potocnik 2015).

Along the same lines, comparative review of policy and legislation framework for youth participation in the Balkans was conducted within the implementation of the project **Balkan regional platform for youth participation and dialogue**, which was implemented by **The European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA)**, and the Balkan Local Democracy Agencies

(LDAs) in 5 targeted countries in the Balkans (Serbia, Kosovo*¹, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

The **purpose** of the comparative review of policy and legislation framework for youth participation in the Balkans is to gather evidence on existing policies and practices in the youth field in the countries concerned, and to identify challenges in the implementation processes regarding youth participation in order to inform the future programming especially targeting youth in vulnerable situations.

Based on evidence, the project **aims** to establish a network of organisations that will contribute in structuring regional thematic cooperation and coordination between civil society and public authorities from targeted countries to **improve environment for youth activism and participation**, in particular of young people with fewer opportunities.

Methodology and limitations of the review

Having in mind that the choice of the best research design depends on the nature of the problem, the resources available, and the researcher's own skills and preferences (Punch, 2000), it is worth noting that this comparative review is based on **qualitative research design**, preferring to examining people, things and events in their natural setting. The research was conducted through intense communication with a variety of "on the ground" stakeholders and professional situations, while the researchers' role was to make a "holistic" overview of the context under study, attempting to capture data on the perceptions of local actors "from the inside", trying to isolate certain themes that can be reviewed, and to "measure" the processes using relatively little standardized instrumentation.

Main responsibility of the researchers was to design the measuring instruments (questionnaires), and to provide quality standards of the research in cooperation with the network of 8 local researchers. The aim of the field research was to collect the local data that will complement regional comparative desk research, to provide expert advice, and support local researchers, acknowledging participative nature of the process. Thus, complex political situation and major administrative differences in institutional structures over the region keep affecting youth policies and make the task of a policy review more challenging.

The report uses a **mixture of quantitative and qualitative methodologies** to assess the state and roots of youth participation and formulate policy recommendations:

¹All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244.

- **Documentary analysis and desk-research:** over 30 policy documents in the countries included, and research reports were consulted and analyzed,
- **Secondary data analysis:** several data sets were re-analyzed with a particular focus on young people to provide comparative data across the region,
- **Survey:** aimed to collect local data that will complement regional comparative desk research indicating the position and needs of youth in local communities involved in the project, while focusing on their perceptions of main opportunities and barriers to youth involvement in civic, political and public life. It was conducted in 5 targeted aforementioned countries, covering **942** young respondents in total. Through online questionnaire, boys and girls from 15 to 30 years of age were reached from both the mainstream population and youth with fewer opportunities (based on ethnic, social, residential, sexual, and other criteria). Questionnaire was composed of 30 questions which were structured in three key themes (see below).
- **Focus groups:** a total of **eight** focus groups were held across the region, involving youth from different backgrounds starting from those having minimal or no experience in participating in public life, to those being active in youth organizations/youth branches of political parties, or participating in formal youth structures/youth councils and pupils' parliaments. The purpose of focus group was to complement findings of the Survey and desk research aiming to capture opinions and attitudes of young people on their role in the process of social change and existing opportunities/barriers to youth participation in their communities/countries.
- **Stakeholder interviews:** **23** (face-to-face) interviews were conducted in total, with relevant stakeholders in 5 targeted countries and 8 cities.

Thematically, comparative review was focused on **two dimensions: Direct youth participation** (where political decisions are influenced directly and structural links to political decision making processes are enabled), and **Indirect forms of participation** (referring to reach out to citizens (especially youth) encouraging them to support certain issues and positions, also enabling discussions, opinion-building as well as campaigning).

According to inputs provided by ALDA's project proposal, main **subject** of this review was widely formulated as YOUTH ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION, and divided in four key thematic areas and categories/subtopics:

Theme 1: YOUTH CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVISM

T1C1: Youth activism and volunteering

Theme 2: YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

T2C1: Youth participation in formal structures

Theme 3: YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

T3C1: Youth participation in youth policy development and implementation

T3C2: Youth participation in politics

Theme 4: YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

T4C1: Participation of youth with fewer opportunities

Accordingly, **the results** of the review are structured around these key themes.

In attempt to address the limitations of the study, it is important to note that although collection of qualitative data was **“richer” in scope**, providing wide description of the phenomenon, it was also **less precise**, limiting possibility of generalization of the results. Accordingly, the level of generalization of the conclusions which can be derived from the data gathered is limited and partial. In this regard, one should be careful in drawing **comparisons** across countries, as the existence of diversified institutional and legal structures does not guarantee efficient functioning of youth policies.

The literature review and **content analysis** were also **limited** in scope due to availability of sources (especially due to lack of monitoring reports and evaluation studies both at the national and local level). An **evidence based research** in the youth field is generally a challenge in the region. In most of the countries in the review there are not so many (updated) sources focusing on the youth and the youth policies. In general, there is a major shortage of reliable and valid statistical data on the situation, attitudes and preferences of young people. Even census data to analyze the demographic trends are missing or outdated for most of the countries.

Finally, the **timeframe** initially given represented serious constraint having in mind the complexity of the topic and scope of the review, so it should be understood as a starting point and potentially valuable platform for further investigation in the field.

SETTING THE FRAMEWORK FOR BALKAN REGIONAL PLATFORM FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND DIALOGUE

Snapshot on the European policy and conceptual framework for youth participation

Over the past three decades, following a cross-sectorial approach and adopting various policy initiatives, the European institutions and organisations have repeatedly emphasized the importance of participation to foster young people's **active citizenship**, enhance their **integration and inclusion** and strengthen their contribution to the development of **democracy** in Europe². Thus, mainstreaming youth participation within the European youth policy framework implies **major changes** in attitudes of both youth and adults, as well as in policies and social structures.

Main arguments to promote youth participation in context of the European youth policy are reflected in two major approaches (EU-CoE Youth Partnership 2014b):

- **A political approach** that sees the greater involvement of children and young people as a means to better mastering the social and demographic challenges,
- **A normative approach** that enshrines youth participation in theoretical democratic reform concepts.

However, it seems that the structures, methods or the political will to involve youth in the decision making processes often lack a **common understanding** of what is meant by youth participation in different circumstances and contexts.

The European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) developed a **pro-active understanding** of youth participation postulating that: *“Participation is not an aim in itself, but an approach to becoming an active citizen”*. Considering participation as an essential principle of the democracies of our time, the concept was defined as *“a pattern of how one lives in a democracy”*, referring to a question of young people's right and obligations in shaping the future society (CDEJ 1990:8).

The CDEJ furthermore stressed that **socio political aspect** of youth participation refers to the point that national and local authorities of the Council of Europe member countries should have to commit themselves to the concept of an **integrated holistic youth policy**, while youth

²European Knowledge Centre on Youth
Policy: <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/citizenshipparticipation-and-information>

participation in local life should be a guiding principle of youth policies at the local level. Local authorities should however have the task of encouraging youth participation at municipalities, and **diversifying participation models** in the form of youth councils, commissions and parliaments. Socio-economic aspect of participation in this regard points an obligation of the member states to provide the **resources** necessary for local youth policies: “Control of these resources should not be dominated by the Establishment but subject to a sharing of management power between youth and the State structure” (CDEJ 1990).

Overall, **the society** has a role to play in promoting and taking off responsibility and decisions through the incentives provided. Youth participation from this perspective represents the opportunity of appreciating democracy, responsibility and ownership, in order to prepare youth to deal with democratic values and human rights and contribute to development of stable democratic and peaceful structures in their countries (ISR 2013).

The promotion of youth participation has additional range of rationales and benefits, not only that it is compliant with Article 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, but it provides a platform for the exercise of active citizenship, providing a ‘*user perspective*’ on the policy issues under consideration (Williamson 2002). It is thus of utmost importance to enhance **good governance** and to avoid disenchantment with politics.

The Council of Europe(CoE) embraced broader scope on youth participation, stating in its Preamble of Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life(CoE 2003) that:

“The active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local and regional level is essential if we are to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies. 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 a right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society”.

In 2002, The Council of Europe and the ministers responsible for youth have underlined the **key role of youth participation** stating that the objectives of youth policy within a Member Countries shall be:

“To strengthen civil society in Europe through the promotion of training for democratic citizenship in a non-formal educational context, to encourage young people’s participation in civil society, to encourage new forms of youth participation and organization, to stimulate young

people's creativity and critical sense, to create the conditions to enable an active participation of young people in decisions which concern them, and to encourage them to commit themselves in their community life" (CoE 2002).

Current policy towards youth of the Council of Europe is based on the Declaration of the 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth (2008): *"The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020"*, where, under one of the priorities of the CoE youth policy and action for the coming years (*'Human rights and democracy'*), ministers emphasize necessity of promoting young people's active participation in democratic processes and structures and equal opportunities for the participation of all young people in all aspects of their everyday lives.

Along the same lines, recent study (EU-CoE Youth Partnership 2015) states that participation is an essential element of citizenship in a democratic society and a democratic Europe, as well as that active citizenship has to be understood not only as political participation, but also as participation in civil society, culture and environmental activities. Contemporary youth in this regard has on disposal more diverse means of active citizenship than their parents, meaning they are users of information and communication technologies that can transform them from objects to subjects and creators of politics and policies.

Among five principles highlighted in the European Governance White Paper³ (2001), participation refers to *"ensuring that young people are consulted and more involved in the decisions which concern them and, in general, the life of their communities"*. Therefore, *"youth participation in democratic institutions and in a continuous dialogue with policy makers is essential to the sound functioning of our democracies and the sustainability of policies which impact on young people's lives"* (Huang, 2011:2).

Representing a new framework for European cooperation and the first step in setting up a coherent youth policy framework in **the European Union**, the European Commission issued The White Paper entitled *'A New Impetus for European Youth'* (2001). The document identifies **youth participation** as one of areas where the EU member states were invited to co-ordinate their policies in the youth field. The document was prompted by the worry that there was a *'democratic deficit in the EU'* and that young people were among those most affected (Denstad, 2009).

Finally, it is important to stress that improving situation of young people is among the topics present in the core European policy documents and youth participation is recognized as one of the top priorities of the European youth policy (*An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and*

Empowering 2009)⁴. It calls for greater cooperation between youth policies and relevant policy areas, and promotes the *social and professional integration of young people* as an essential component to reach the objectives of the EU 2020 strategy for growth and jobs, fostering personal fulfillment, social cohesion and active citizenship of young people. The objective of the Commission in terms of youth participation is to: *'Ensure full participation of youth in society, by increasing youth participation in the civic life of local communities and in representative democracy, by supporting youth organisations as well as various forms of 'learning to participate', by encouraging participation of non - organised young people and by providing quality information services'* (European Commission, 2009: 8).

In light of the current crisis, The Council of the EU agrees in its Work Plan (up to the end of 2015) that, among other themes, *Empowerment, with a special focus on access to rights, autonomy, participation and active citizenship within and outside the EU* should be given priority by Member States and the Commission in their cooperation at EU level⁵.

Current trends of youth participation in Europe

'There is no crisis of participation of European youth, but there is a huge opportunity that awaits taking'(EACEA, 2013)

Despite the European standards and comprehensive policy framework, young people's **patterns of participation** in democratic life of societies in the wider European context (including non-EU members of the Council of Europe) vary in line with different cultural norms, history and geography. Recent evidence point to the **changing patterns** of political engagement and new citizenship perceptions of young people across Europe where *"loss of community ties, little interest in and knowledge of political processes, low levels of trust in politicians and growing cynicism of democratic institutions are often seen as indicators of the younger generations' weakened sense of citizenship and political engagement"* (EACEA 2014:2).

Participation of European young citizens in both political and civic affairs in recent years follows the trend of a **decrease** in formal (conventional) forms and an **increase** in informal (unconventional) forms of participation linked with the fact that young people's **access to power** structures is often limited and suffers from a precarious economic situation compared to other age groups (Huang, 2011:1). This apparent *'paradox'* has been jointly interpreted

⁴ The EU Youth Strategy was endorsed by the Council through the Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018). This followed the release of the Commission Communication "An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering", COM (2009) 200 final, 27 April 2009.

⁵ Council of the European Union (2014), Draft Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on a European Union Work Plan for Youth for 2014-2015, Brussels (p. 5)

by experts stating that young people are far from being apathetic but participate mostly in **non-conventional** ways. Petitions, public demonstrations, boycotts, wearing political symbols such as badges and stickers, become the means of *more loose and informal participation* in society and in politics, which many young people find worth experiencing. In addition, many young people resort to the Internet and its social media to interact with public authorities and exchange opinions on political issues (EC 2015).

Expressing a growing dissatisfaction with the way politics is conducted and with '*politicians in general*', young people across Europe want politics to **change** but they also **want to participate** in it on equal basis. The EU Youth Report 2015 informs that about one third of young Europeans report to be very or quite interested in politics. Yet, young people's lower levels of interest in politics are partly explained by the fact that *political awareness and socialization* take time and reach their highest at older age (EC 2015:96). The problem also lies in the fact that surveys and analysis underlining a poor participation by young people are often '*the product of an overly formalistic definition of political participation, too focused on very limited measures of engagement, exclusively in the arena of formal politics*' (EACEA/EC 2013:45).

Recent studies however see young people as an important actors of today's democracy: '*young people are not 'victims' or 'problematic' as often claimed, but diverse and critical stakeholders in democracy*' (EACEA/EC 2013:8). They express and articulate ideas and preferences, and defend diverse interests, often being more engaged than other age groups (notably through volunteering). Yet, young people **do not believe** that politicians sufficiently address their concerns, especially those who are systemically excluded (through poverty, unemployment, linguistic, ethnic or social integration, etc.). Due to a lack of opportunity for meaningful political inclusion amongst youth, they argue that '*democracy should not work better for some than for others as it currently does*' (EACEA/EC 2013:8).

Important diversifying factor furthermore, lies in a widespread belief amongst youth that political engagement requires **a particular set of skills** including aptitude in interpersonal relations, rhetorical dexterity, and networking ability. The perceived requirement for political skills is even more evident amongst youth experiencing social and political exclusion, for which a highly formalized model of political engagement was perceived as *alien and intimidating*. In addition, young respondents from disadvantaged backgrounds reported encountering **material obstacles** to political participation (EC 2015:187). Potential **digital divide** in the use of communication technologies for participative purposes can also restrict access to knowledge and networks to those who does not have the opportunity to use a computer and surf the internet, thereby replicating the social inequalities existing in the 'non-virtual' environment.

Overall, **political education** and various **political contexts and institutions** are proven to have a pivotal role in the extent and nature of youth participation in democratic life across Europe. In order to **boost and amplify** youth participation in Europe, **recommendations for policy and practice**⁶ have been recently created focusing on five main areas of improvement i.e. **understanding** of participation of young people; **learning** to be a democratic citizen as a key factor for participation; developing stimulating and democratic **social context** to rear democratic (young) persons; making use of existing examples of **good practice**; and providing a better **knowledge** of the participation of young people.

The modern generation of young people in the Balkans, however, is maturing in turbulent social circumstances. More recent scientific studies have shown that social and political changes that have occurred since 1990s have generally **not increased** the chances of young people to facilitate social integration nor participate in social life and decision-making processes (Ilisinat *all* 2015). Therefore, it is important to problematize the **democratic potential of young people** which stems from their **political culture**⁷, and represents an important resource both for a better present and a stable future for a democratic society (Ilisinat *all* 2015: 18).

⁶ These recommendations have been drafted by an editorial group based on the results of the Multilateral Cooperation Project "Participation of young people in the democratic Europe" & of the Reflection Group on Youth Participation of the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, http://www.cap-lmu.de/download/2014/Recommendations_YouthParticipation.pdf.

⁷ The political culture is hereby understood as 'cognitive, affective and evaluative orientations toward the political system in general, its input and output aspects of the individual as a political actor' (Almond, Verba, 2000: 22 as cited in Ilisinat *all* 2015: 17), which, among other, includes citizens' attitudes towards political values, institutions and participation.

Context of the national youth policies in the Balkans

The five countries targeted by the project (Serbia, Kosovo*, Montenegro, BiH, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) share a **common tradition** in youth policy development and implementation, which, after the 1990s, started to take on various forms, mostly in efforts to comply with the European policies⁸.

Still, young people are treated differently by sector specific acts and policies across the region, such as education system related laws, the law on juvenile justice, family law, etc. The **definition** of youth in targeted countries is mainly based on age, covering ranges from **15 to 24** (like in Kosovo and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, although, due to the consequences of the socioeconomic crisis, those aged 24 to 30 are also considered), and from **15 to 30** (like in Serbia, and Montenegro). In BiH, however, there are two definitions of youth in parallel to the dual administrative State structure, although these two definitions are very similar: *The Law on the Youth of the Federation of BiH* and the *Republic of Srpska Law on Youth Organization* regulates and defines the youth, first one stating youth means persons aged 15 to 30 years and the latter from 16 to 30. The third self-governed Brčko District does not have a legal definition of youth.

Besides improving existing acts, a need for development of specific **youth related legislation** is identified in a growing number of transitional countries, in order to regulate a wide spectrum and different dimensions of youth related activities and bodies (IOM regional overview, 2010).

Having in mind that the countries targeted by this review also employ different strategies and action plans in a field of youth policy, brief review of the main actors and policy/legal documents will be provided below.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state constituted by two entities: Republic of Srpska (RS) and Federation of BiH (FBiH) which consists of 10 Cantons. There is also the self-governing district of Brčko. *Youth Study Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Potocnik 2015) states that: [...] *Twenty years since Dayton Peace Agreement, the country still faces economic, social and political challenges. These*

⁸In this regard, recent initiative of the umbrella youth organizations from Croatia, Slovenia, FYROM, Montenegro, and BiH ('Youth Participation – More than a Catch word', 2014), which is supported by the European Commission Youth in Action Programme, recognized importance of the direct youth involvement in creation of the National Reports on youth which should provide certain level of harmonization of the national youth policies across the region with the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2010/2018).

challenges mostly relate to the difficulty of the society to find a common denominator for political and economic development of the country”.

Due to the duality in **administrative structure**, there are differences at the entity level. The FBiH has a youth law (2010) that outlines legal protections and provisions for youth rights, youth work and youth councils. The RS has a youth policy 2010-2015 focusing on employment, housing, education, society, information, youth work, leisure, participation and culture. The Law on Volunteering and Youth Organization was adopted in 2008, creating the legal framework for regulating the concept of volunteerism for the first time, which was recently rated as the most encouraging for the development of volunteering in the region.

Main **governmental bodies** responsible for youth policy in FBiH are Federal Ministry for Culture and Sport, Federal Ministry of Education and Science, while in the RS the Department for Youth within the Ministry of Family, Youth & Sports has responsibility for youth. In 2004, the BiH Council of Ministers adopted the Decision establishing the ‘Commission for Coordination of the Youth issues in BiH’ (CCYI BiH), a standing body responsible of dealing with the problems of youth, which started its activities in 2006. As a result, the document “Coordinated Youth policy in BiH 2011- 2015” was drafted to be effective at national level. However, the youth policy development and implementation at state level is facing obstacles and more efficiently handled at entities level.

However, **participation** of the youth at the **local level** in activities of the public and civic organizations is rather weak in BiH. Networking between youth organizations is lacking and youth information channels are virtually nonexistent. The poor and insufficient communication channels pertain the youth participation even in the levels of design and implementation of leisure and cultural activities. Only one per cent of the young people are institutionally active in representing the interests and solving the problems of young people.

Kosovo*

The Youth Department within the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport has responsibility over youth affairs and policy in Kosovo*. The department is mandated to implement *the Youth Strategy and Action Plan*, conduct analysis of the youth sector, develop programmes for identified groups of youth, coordinate with departments, municipalities and organisations to develop and implement policies, support the formation of clubs and associations for youth, encourage financial and other support for the youth sector, and provide information for youth about services and programs. *The Youth Strategy 2013-2017 and the Action Plan 2013-2015* has a vision for young people: [...] *to become active, healthy, educated citizens, who enjoy a good*

and qualitative life and prepare to face all challenges of life as responsible members of local, regional, European and world community (Potocnik 2015).

The Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth (2009) outlines rights, responsibilities and obligations of governmental authorities and youth organisations, aiming at constantly advancing and reaffirming youth participation in the decision making process, in order to improve quality of life of young people and of their social status.

The Central Youth Action Council of Kosovo (CYAC) exists to [...] advance the rights of young people and to ensure that strong collective voice of young people heard to policy and decision makers at all levels. Activities of the CYAC include research, representation to government, participation in youth policy design & implementation, awareness campaigns, and youth exchanges. In 2013 CYAC received support from the OSCE to aid their participation in policy- and decision-making locally and nationally.

Thus, the situation of **youth participation** is rather dim in Kosovo*. The country review (Ferrer-Fons 2013) reveals that there is very limited influence of youth on the institutions that affect their lives, whether in family, at school or in the community. Kosovar young people display a lack of faith in Kosovo institutions in general, questioning their efficiency and integrities. The societal change following the war has severely affected the volunteer culture. There is also a lack of a regional network and sufficient legal regulations that would encourage and stimulate volunteerism in Kosovo. Youth CSOs are active but they are concentrated in major urban areas and young people in rural areas are excluded and underserved. *The Kosovo Youth Network (KYN)* is an independent body representing 127 youth organizations and youth centers throughout Kosovo.

International organisations still present one of the major stakeholders in the youth field in Kosovo. Still, the major challenge for the development of efficient youth policy is the fact that sustainability and exit strategies for the international donors were not well planned which made the survival of many youth CSOs rather difficult.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The aim of Macedonia's *National Youth Strategy* (2005) is to "[...] improve general position and satisfy the needs and interests of the young people in the country". The Agency for Youth and Sports, and 'youth coordination of associations', are responsible for its implementation through actions plans. The National Steering Committee for implementation of *the National Youth Strategy*, that included representatives from both the government and the youth NGOs, was

also established in 2005. However, the Policy Review states (2011: 16) there are 85 municipalities and only few of them have serious focus on youth, and support youth activities mainly by supporting youth information centres. In 2012 the Ministry for Labour and social care adopted the first action plan for employment of youth. Target group are 135.000 young people aged 15-29. Duration of the action plan is 2012-2015 and 27 million euros are located for implementation of the plan.

Based on evidence, there is ongoing process of development of **new strategic framework** targeting youth in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which will cover period from 2015-2015. Yet, it is important to underline two **laws** in relation to youth work: Law on Volunteerism and Law on Associations and Foundations. The latter is important for youthfield as it facilitates forming of groups and includes the possibility of registering associations for youth under 18. Law on youth in general and a specific law on regulation of youth organizations are currently at the proposal stage.

Despite the efforts to increase the youth **participation** and promotion of volunteering, the number of young people participating in the society and volunteering is very low. The channels for direct participation of young people in decision making processes are not sufficient and efficient. An important mechanism of youth participation is through national youth councils. Two prominent **national youth representation structures** exist in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM) is a nationwide youth umbrella organization, established in June 2013 to promote and advocate for youth rights. The Coalition of Youth Organizations (SEGA) is a national organisation of youth groups and CSOs, established in 2004 “in order to contribute to the development and implementation” of the National Youth Strategy (2005) and is co-author of the 2009 action plan alongside the Agency for Youth and Sports.

Montenegro

Montenegro's *National Youth Action Plan* was adopted in 2006 (NYAP 2006-2011). Montenegro's Directorate for Youth and Sports, an independent administrative body under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, is responsible for youth affairs. The creation of the National Youth Council of Montenegro was initiated in October 2010, further supported in June 2011 and completed in 2012. National Youth Steering Committee was a co-management body consisted of members from NGO sector, ministries and other governmental institutions, established in 2007 in order to monitor, evaluate and advise for the improvement of national youth policy, and work on cross-sectoral cooperation.

Although, The European Union's 2013 *Screening Report* states that "Montenegro's youth policy is already largely in line with the common objectives established at EU level" and that the planned "future adoption of the Law on youth is intended to lay a solid foundation for further developments in this field", in the context of development of the **new strategic framework** majority of the abovementioned structures are going to be substantially transformed.

Due to severe **policy vacuum**, urgent development and adoption of the youth policy is needed, i.e. youth strategy and the appropriate action plans, as well as with the preparation of the adequate budget for their implementation, i.e. adequate Youth Fund. Urgent establishment of the efficient channels of communication between the responsible ministry and the Directorate and on the inter-ministerial level about the youth issues is needed, so that there is a systematic approach to the dynamic development and implementation of the youth policy. Establishment of efficient youth services in all municipalities is also required as well as promotion and recognition of the profession of "youth worker" and other supporting occupations (teaching assistant, community mediators, etc.). Youth strategy should also envisage mechanism for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the action plans that the involved structures are to implement in cooperation with the young (Hadzibegovic 2015).

Serbia

The *National Youth Strategy* (2008) was, [...] *the first step towards a systematic solution to the problem of youth status and... [supporting] young people in different spheres of social life*, followed by *the Law on Youth* (2011). The Strategy determined the attitude of the state towards young people, a possible role of youth in society, and the modes of establishing a partnership relation, identifying opportunities, responsibilities, and institutional mechanisms for youth.

Newly developed *National Youth Strategy 2015-2025* represents furthermore a comprehensive document outlining the priority objectives which implementation should contribute to an active and equal participation of young people in various areas of social life. The strategy specifically recognizes the groups of young people who are **vulnerable, marginalized, at risk of social exclusion and poverty** as well as those who are exposed to multiple discrimination and exclusion. All developed goals and activities need to provide support to these groups of young people, better identification of vulnerable young people, while the action plan indicators must address separately and monitor all categories of young people at risk of social exclusion.

Recognizing **youth** and their **important role in the society**, the strategy should be realized by all subjects of youth policy and therefore it is important to develop a clear mechanism for

coordinating implementation, specify the roles of all stakeholders of youth policy and to raise the capacity of all stakeholders of youth policy for its implementation. Starting from the goal set in *the Law on Youth*, it seeks to ensure conditions for enabling young people to reach their full potential, participate actively in society, while contributing not only to their own development but also to the development of society.

The scope of the volunteer activities in Serbia is furthermore covered by the Law on Volunteerism, as adopted in March 2010 together with the Strategy for Career Guidance and Youth Counselling. Importantly, The Serbian Youth Umbrella Organisation (KOMS) represents, [...] *the highest representative body of the young people in Serbia whose mission is to represent the interests of young people by developing a partnership with the state, inter-agency and international cooperation, encouraging the active participation of young people and organizational development of its members.*

Although **active participation** in Serbia seems to be a popular idea among young people, the reality does not reflect this positive opinion. One of areas that need to be developed and continuously further improved is reflected in provision of the increasing coverage of youth activities aimed at the implementation of the strategy, through the development of mechanisms for monitoring and increase coverage, with special emphasis on the coverage of vulnerable young people.

Furthermore, creating a legal and policy framework that **encourages participation and activism** of young people is possible only with the creation of various efficient mechanisms that will allow active participation of young people in public policies. New strategic document in this regard states that [...] *youth policy actors, shall ensure a stimulating environment and offer active support in the performance of youth activities for young people, in their taking initiative and in their meaningful involvement in decision-making processes and processes of implementation of decisions that contribute to personal and social development, while young people shall receive complete information.*

Reflecting furthermore on **the context** for development of policy and legislative frameworks targeting youth in the region, the data from national surveys conducted on representative samples of young people based on the **Shell Youth Survey**(Potocnik 2015)⁹, provide valuable insight into perception of **major problems** in the societies across the region(in all countries

⁹Since 1953, the Shell company has been commissioning independent academics and institutes to carry out studies, which document the attitudes, opinions and expectations of young people. They have primarily been conducted in Germany, but the countries of the Council of Europe have also been included. The countries of the South East Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia) have been part of the Shell study since 2011. The South East Europe Shell studies were coordinated and financed by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

except in Montenegro, see Table 1) which are heavily influencing a level of optimism of youth placed in the future.

Table 1: The major problems in the society – the first five ranked problems

RANK /COUNTRIES	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo*	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Serbia
1	Unemployment	Unemployment	Unemployment	Unemployment
2	Poverty	Poverty	Poverty	Poverty
3	Job insecurity	Kosovo territory	Increased incidence of chronic diseases	Insufficient fight against corruption
4	Justice	Environmental pollution	Job insecurity	Improving the position of young people
5	Insufficient fight against corruption	Job insecurity	Environmental pollution	Social justice and Security for all

Youth in all four countries¹⁰ placed **unemployment and poverty** as two most critical issues, followed by job insecurity and problems related to insufficient fight against corruption, chronic diseases, environmental pollution, and the position of youth in the society. The results are somewhat alarming, as young people in BiH for example, urgently need some positive impetus in order to see some better prospects, while youth in Kosovo* and Serbia (Potocnik 2015), despite many constraints that they are facing, keep an optimistic individual perceptions of their future.

Interestingly, young people in Serbia recognize another important problem of social and political life – which is absence of **solidarity** (Tomanovic 2015), while **trust** into institutions and support to transnational ideas, like the EU, partly result from the above mentioned recognition of major problems in the society.

Institutions in which the youth in the Balkans places **trust** depict public sentiments towards institutional and civil framework and can be related to a level of social engagement and a sense of belonging. It is therefore interesting to note that in some countries an apparatus of state force (the police) goes hand in hand with religious institutions and that CSOs are **not present** at the first five positions in all four observed countries.

¹⁰ Montenegro has not taken part in the Shell survey, so we can only assume that youth results in Montenegro do not differ significantly to those of their peers in other presented countries.

In social sciences furthermore **engagement in voluntary activities**, often indicates a level of social capital and networking potential. The data shows that only in Kosovo* and BiHa share of young people who volunteered in past 12 months presents a relatively significant number and can be related to increased potential for social actions and participation. The data on shares of young people interested in different ranges of **politics** on the other hand shows that only Kosovo reports somehow higher youth interest in politics (Potocnik 2015).

Finally, with some exceptions, the legislative treatment of vulnerable groups has been **largely neglected** across the region. The researchers included in Shell national surveys recognized **discrimination** as one of the important issues. Table 2 shows the first five ranked grounds of discrimination experienced by the youth in four countries (including economic status, political affiliation, residence, religion, ethnicity, gender, educational level and sexual orientation). It is interesting to note that economic status and gender are highly ranked in majority of the countries (while sexual orientation is present only in one), in line with the finding that the **economic (and social class)** and **gender discrimination** appear as the most commonly observed in other studies in the region (Tomanovic *et al* 2015:87).

Table 2: Rank of the grounds of discrimination experienced by the youth (the first five ranked grounds)

RANK /COUNTRIES	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo*	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Serbia
1	Religion	Gender	Political affiliation	Economic status
2	Economic status	Economic status	Ethnicity	Gender
3	Educational level	Religion	Gender	Residence
4	Ethnicity	Ethnicity	Residence	Ethnicity/ Educational level
5	Residence	Educational level	Sexual orientation	Religion

*Source: Shell national surveys

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED – THE EMPIRICAL DATA ANALYSIS

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

The purpose of interview was to complement findings of survey and desk research aiming to capture opinion and experience of **stakeholders** regarding the role of youth in the process of social change, as well as to explore the ways of governmental support to youth participation at the local, national and regional level. Particular focus is given to existing opportunities and barriers to youth participation especially targeting youth in vulnerable situations.

In total, **23** interviews were conducted (face-to-face), with stakeholders in the countries included and in 8 cities. Local researchers, youth engagement workers with the support of regional experts conducted the interviews with variety of the representatives of public and private organizations/institutions (namely ministries, national youth bodies, national umbrella organizations, cantonal parliament, local governments, local youth offices, political parties and NGO's).

Within the interview sessions representatives of the institutions/organizations gave their opinion on a set of questions which covering various aspects of youth policy and youth participation.

- **How does the institution and organization perceive the role of young people in the process of social change, especially regarding their active participation**

Through interviews, an opportunity was given to the stakeholders to present their view on youth, their position in contemporary society, and their role in social changes.

- Some of the statements of the governmental representatives are listed below, picturing quite **positive and optimistic** perspective on the matter:

“Creating a quality and equitable future is possible only with the cooperation of young people.”
(Municipality of Mostar)

“I see them as equal, motivated participants in these processes.” (Municipality of Zavidovici)

„Their role is crucial. They must be considered as generation that leads to change.”
(Municipality of Peje/Peć)

- On the other hand, representatives of CSOs and local/national participatory bodies were **not that optimistic**. Most of them highlighted that the current participation of young people is at a low level, by volume, variety and quality.

„In my opinion the society is still keeping young people on distance from all social changes and influences. All the decisions are made by older people, and really young people have little opportunity to influence any kind of change. Also, the youth have a problem of being passive, and the lack of desire to act for changes“. (CSO, Zavidovici)

„Young people today are primarily fighting for a place in the labor market because the overall economic situation is also affected by the low level of employment of young people in Montenegro. Most young people are primarily focused to this goal and are therefore often faced with inaction or indifference of youth for certain changes. (Youth office, Niksic)

„I recognize the overall lack of interest of young people for participation in political processes, in social, economic, and other, particularly in local communities.“ (Municipal Council, Niksic)

„The youth are not influential on the social change, and that is mainly because we are in lack of systematic approach for inclusion of youth in the social changes“. (National Youth Council of Macedonia)

„Young people are not sufficiently informed about the possibilities of participation, not included, there are not sufficiently developed mechanisms or policies, or mechanisms are inadequate, or young people are manipulated.“ (National youth umbrella organization, Serbia)

Overall, the statements given by the stakeholders can be interpreted in the way that the first group has a very partial insight in the role and identity of ‘youth’ as a social group, and therefore they do not perceive their role in the social change and do not recognize value/importance of youth participation. The second group of stakeholders recognizes youth as beneficiaries i.e. target group whose ‘problems have to be solved’, so youth has more or less passive role in the process. Third group of stakeholders however, perceives young people as equal actors, and partners in the process of social change.

Majority of the local governmental representatives furthermore does not recognize their own role and responsibility in establishing the conditions which will encourage young people to actively participate and develop their sense of citizenship.

Some representatives of the national youth bodies, and civil society organizations have shown however quite affirmative approach to youth and their active participation. They perceive participation from various aspects, considering prerequisites, different shapes and its qualitative characteristics.

Some key issues which have been identified (and should be taken in consideration for the future programming) are the lack of interest of young people to participate, their general apathy,

unawareness and lack of information about existing opportunities, lack of competences, limited access to information and resources, socio-economic and existential barriers, the sense of inferiority, etc. On the other hand, 'the system' is recognized as not suited and adopted to needs of contemporary youth, or indifferent/incompetent to provide innovative and meaningful tools/mechanisms for active youth engagement.

- **Are there youth policies and mechanisms for active youth participation in place (including: Youth Council, National Youth Umbrella Organization, Youth unions, Cross-ministerial bodies for youth issues) and what challenges are you facing in their implementation**

Bosnia and Herzegovina:

The respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, representatives of municipal and cantonal institutions, recognize some of the mechanisms that have been developed, primarily Youth Councils stipulated by the Law on Youth, Youth Councils on municipal and city level, cantonal Youth Council and the Youth Council of the Federation. The application of these mechanisms in practice is not always in accordance with their purpose, and thus are Youth Councils in various ways practiced depending on the support of government and the existing capacities of young people. In some municipalities it is not possible to establish a Youth Council because there is no sufficient number of organizations available for their membership.

Kosovo*:

The respondents from Kosovo* point out that some of the mechanisms for youth participation are available but not fully active or functional, for example youth council and youth unions. The implementation is weak especially when it comes to enforcement and participation of young people in the reform of education, health and employment policies. Young people are included in policy making mostly through Local Youth Council.

Montenegro:

Existing local and national youth policies includes mechanisms for active youth participation in decision-making, but young people do not show enough interest or does not possess relevant competences. Majority of youngsters are not familiarized with opportunities of youth participation in the decision-making processes, and they have not been properly introduced to the existence of policies and legislation at local and national level. The reason for such situation the interviewed stakeholders see in the lack of professional capacities and financial resources of the responsible governmental bodies.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia:

Through the interviews it was found that respondents do not understand clearly the difference between instruments and mechanisms for the implementation of youth policy, and therefore they did not provide meaningful information to young people on the matter. Furthermore, due to the lack of Law on youth, there are not formally regulated mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making processes in Macedonia. There is a practice of sporadic inclusion of the representatives of CSO's in the work of working committees of particular ministries or institutions, so this can be recognized as a form of 'informal co-management'.

Serbia:

It is stated that there is a practice of formal youth structures and sporadically co-management committees at the local level, but the issue of representativeness of youth it is very visible. The local structures for youth participation in the vast majority are composed of young people delegated by political parties. Therefore, despite existing youth policy regulations, functional youth participation in the decision-making processes does not exist, and is often faced with manipulation of the young people for the benefit of the political parties. On the national level there is a National Youth Council, the highest representative body of youth in Serbia, which is example of the cross-sectorial co-management body exercising transparent involvement of youth.

Within all targeted countries and local communities involved, there are different (but also often similar) ways of the mechanisms of active youth participation established. These models of associating youth and providing their representativeness, as well as cooperation with institutions through co-management are inseparable part of the decision-making processes. Therefore, efforts given to ensure conditions for establishment and quality of implementation of those mechanisms are understandable in the last ten years across the region.

➤ **Youth Policy from development, through implementation to assess the effectiveness**

Most of the respondents were familiar with the topic of youth policy, but there were also those who were not familiar with the specific role of youth policies in the process of social change, or with the different mechanisms for youth participation.

In all of the targeted countries and communities there are youth policies in place, to a greater or lesser extent. There is a general tendency of creation of youth policies at the national, regional and local level. In the past ten years, most of the actors in the field are sensitized to a certain extent, so there is a common understanding of the need for youth policy across the Balkans. In majority of cases the policy-making process is implemented by governmental institutions. Most of the policies are created in the consultative processes in cooperation with young people,

youth organizations and relevant institutions. However, the quality of the consultation process can be questioned, as well as adaptation of strategies and plans to specific needs and priorities of young people.

There is a practice of creation of youth strategies and action plans by expert teams following a general template without adjustments to specific national or local frameworks and conditions. Also, sometimes policy development is taking place without conducting research and analysis of needs and situation of youth, and assessment of the results achieved in previous cycles of the strategy/action plan implementation.

Stakeholders pointed out the important question of setting realistic framework for action plan implementation in order to make it successful and meaningful. The problem of setting unrealistic results for strategies and action plans is frequently present in most of the countries and local communities, and it become an aspect of youth policy which has attracted the greatest attention.

Some respondents raised the question of monitoring and evaluation of the performance and results of policy implementation. At the national level, there are some forms of monitoring and evaluation, while at the local level these are usually neglected, mostly due to the lack of understanding of the long-term strategic approaches, and the lack of finances.

Even when developing a quality and realistically planned youth policies, some implementation issues like be budget planning can occur. Throughout the region, there is a problem of poor planning and distribution of finances for the implementation of youth strategies, both at the national and local level. What is generally happening is fragmentation of the funds to support as many organizations as possible to implement short-term activities, which does not contribute to reaching sustainable results and change.

Additionally, the interviews confirm that there are various forms of legislative regulations and acts in place in the youth field across the region. Most of them are developed in accordance with the legislation of the European Union. Some of the processes of development of legislative frameworks were consultative and participative meaning that young people had an opportunity to participate, to some extent.

➤ **Participation of young people in vulnerable situations in the decision-making processes**

Bosnia and Herzegovina:

Some of the stakeholders work directly with vulnerable young people and they presented their perspective, mostly looking at young people as service users. Some of them make a special

effort in work with young Roma, children of single parents or without parents and youth from rural areas, so that young people learn about active participation in the organization.

It was concluded that the vulnerable youth is mostly neglected in youth participation structures. Exception is some representatives of the vulnerable youth taking membership in the different municipal committees.

Kosovo*:

Similarly, some of the stakeholders are directly involving vulnerable young people, by developing their capacities for taking part in the decision making processes. Some of these people are part of the different formal youth structures at the local and national level.

Montenegro:

Representatives of the organizations involved in the interviews presented the model of youth work through youth clubs which involves young people in activities, competence development and civic participation. Within these youth clubs young people from rural and urban areas, from various political parties, are engaged in different sports, culture and art activities gaining competences for active participation. Institutions presented their view on participation of vulnerable youth in decision-making processes as it depends only on willingness and decisions of young people.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia:

Institutions do not recognize the need to use specially chosen method of accession to vulnerable young people, but access for all young people the same through public debate, which allows young people to participate in the creation of youth policies, national strategies.

The National Youth Council is accessible and inclusive to vulnerable groups to the highest level. The Steering of NYC committee is consisted of different members of smaller ethnic communities in the state. Other bodies are consisted of members from vulnerable groups. The regional offices help with inclusion of members who are living in different smaller towns and among our 60 members they have members that are part of many marginalized categories, regardless if it ethnics, place of living, sexual orientation, type of profession (sexual workers) or gender.

Serbia:

Stakeholders are having opinion that participation of vulnerable youth in the decision-making processes could be improved through introduction of quota system. Some of the organizations are making special effort in working with young Roma, youth with mental disabilities and youth from rural areas, so that young people learn about active participation through regular youth

work activities. Within Serbian youth umbrella organization (KOMS) there is no specific policy or principles and mechanisms for vulnerable groups, there are no quotas. The member organizations are working with vulnerable groups such as Roma, young people with AIDS, persons with disabilities. Cooperation with the Council of the Blind of Serbia is also established.

A general conclusion for all of the countries surveyed and local communities involved is that there are diverse forms of involvement of vulnerable youth groups and individuals in the decision-making processes. For the most of these practices, specifically defined procedures, and specially designed mechanisms do not exist. There is also a general expectation that youth in vulnerable situations should access existing services the same way as mainstreaming youth without adjustment of the services offered or channels of communication used.

➤ **Competencies of young people for active participation**

Bosnia and Herzegovina:

Young people mostly use competencies acquired through practice/volunteering, or through engagement in CSO's. Some stakeholders notice that the key competences of young people today are digital competences, communication in English language, and they think that young people should work on building additional competencies such as social and civic responsibility, cultural awareness, creativity, initiative and entrepreneurship. Other stakeholders think that youth needs to be politically educated, so they can fight for their interests with arguments, while communicating with the representatives of institutions. Wider range of skills is also recognized as relevant such as: learning to learn, interpersonal and civic competences, problem solving and development of mathematical, and technological literacy.

Kosovo*:

Interviewed stakeholders from Kosovo think that the direction of creating young leaders in the community is through their participation in political parties and municipality, and through participation in formal structures for youth participation. Important prerequisites for participation that have been identified are as follows: young people have to be active, involved as volunteers, to be informed of the existing processes and opportunities, to be part of social change.

Montenegro:

Stakeholders noted that young people are increasingly recognizing the need for learning foreign languages, and importance of computer literacy. They also recognize value of non-formal education related to development of the skills linked to employability. The negative side of it is that some of young men and women become 'collectors' of diplomas, certificates, which drags

them from the essence. Still, some of them recognize importance of active participation in local communities and social contexts in which they live. Also, they recognize importance of being aware of the legal framework and understanding the processes of decision making and participation in social changes in all levels. Special importance was given to development of management skills and communication skills, knowledge of advocacy process, lobbying, being a team player, initiating constructive discussions, and participating actively in the dialogue.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia:

Stakeholders in Macedonia expect of young people to be active, diplomatic, to have developed soft skills, to know how to express themselves in order to achieve hearing of their voice. Also they recognize knowledge and skills in developing policies, strategic plans, and projects as important for successful youth participation, together with advocacy and lobbying.

Serbia:

Stakeholders from Serbia are prioritizing importance of being informed, and learning to participate by actually doing, by providing opportunities for youth to participate in the decision making processes that affect them, in order to be able to develop sense of responsibility and belonging to the community. In addition, following list of important competences, values and attitudes was provided: Leadership skills, volunteer spirit, mobility, communication skills, interpersonal assertiveness, understanding diversity, critical thinking, initiative, flexibility-adaptability to different situations, teamwork, decision-making skills, presentation skills; tolerance, and non-discrimination.

Setting expectations towards youth so high, implies that the stakeholders, generally, do not understand the principles and models of co-management models, and inter-generational cooperation, where youth is not supposed to imitate adults, but to engage in the process by using their authentic potentials, together with critical reflections and experiences of contemporary young generation embedding all of their challenges and imperfections.

ONLINE SURVEY

➤ Description of the sample

Through online questionnaire **942 young men and women** were reached in total with following characteristics:

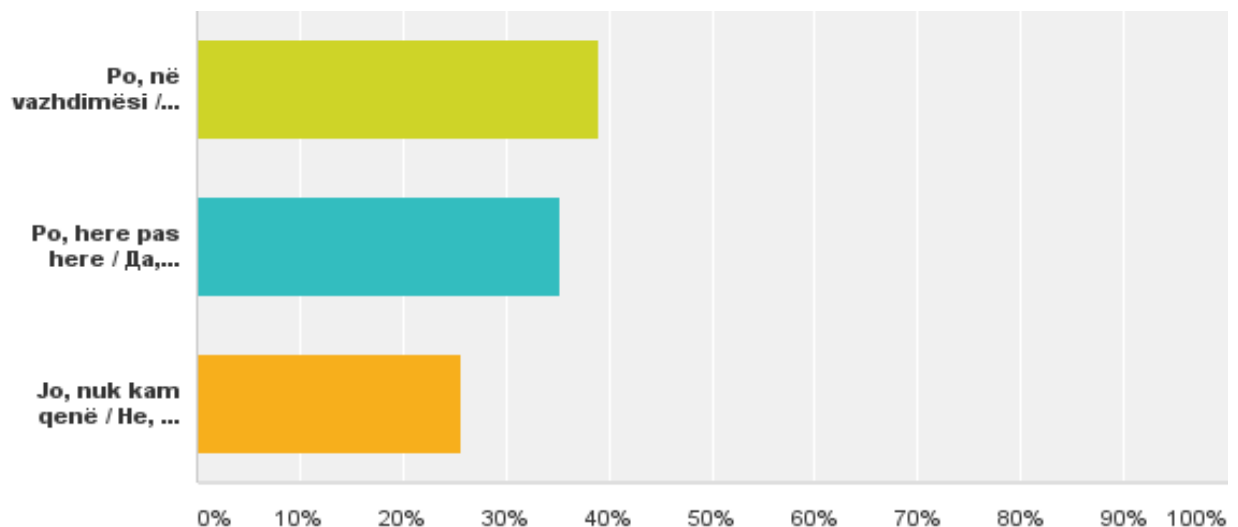
Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female: 64 % • Male: 36 % 	Age <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age 15 – 19 : 26 % • Age 20 – 25 : 40 % • Age 26 – 30 : 34 % 	Occupation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pupil : 17 % • Student : 38 % • Employed : 27 % • Unemployed : 18 %
Country <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bosnia and Hercegovina: 34 % • Montenegro: 12 % • Macedonia: 15 % • Serbia: 32 % • Kosovo: 7 % 	Place of Residence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Village: 17 % • Small town: 39 % • City: 44 % 	

Theme 1: YOUTH CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVISM

T1C1: Youth activism and volunteering

➤ Young people's participation in community oriented CSOs

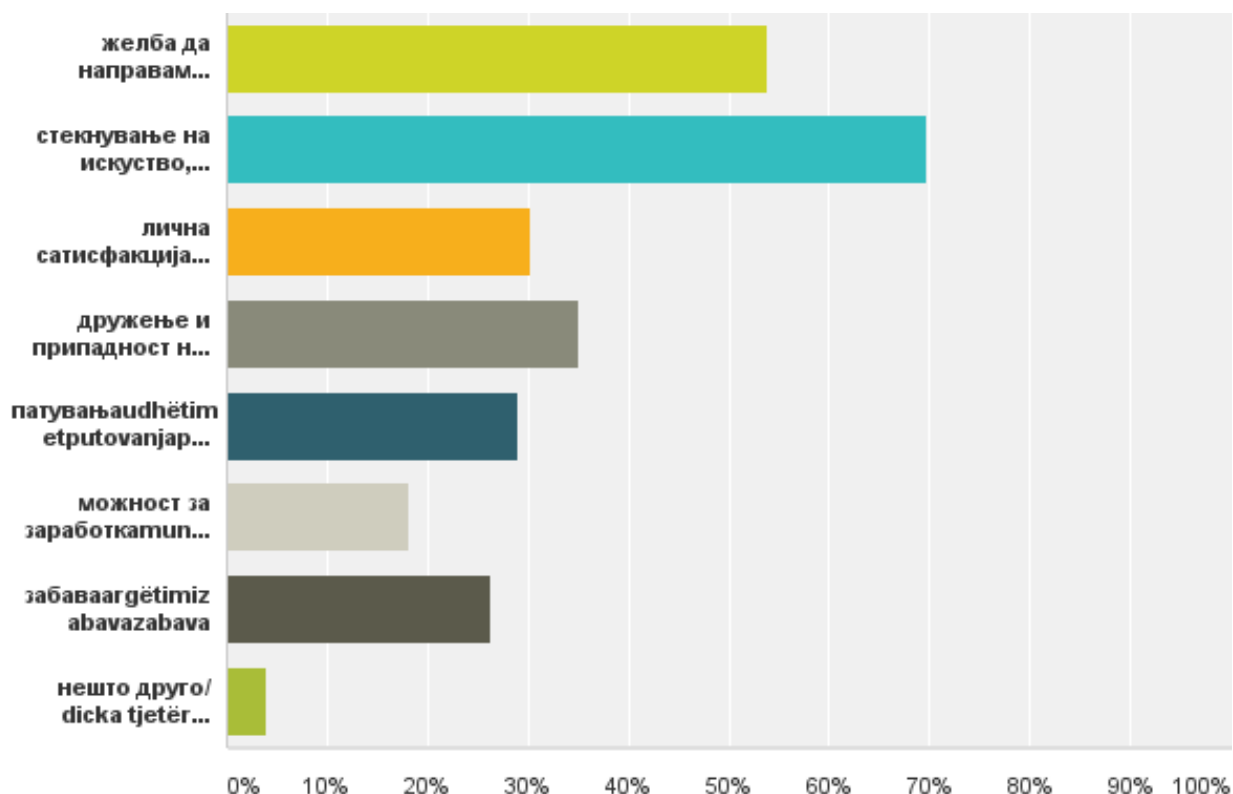
The results show that young people are active in non-governmental organizations/ youth organizations in the following ratio:



- **YES, continuously: 39 %**
- **YES, periodically: 35 %**
- **NO, I do not participate: 26 %**

Limited possibility of generalization of the results has to be kept in mind in this regard, since aforementioned ratios reflect main tendencies of youth civic participation in targeted countries, while some other available data may show significantly lower percentages.

➤ **MOTIVATION of young people for participation in organizations**



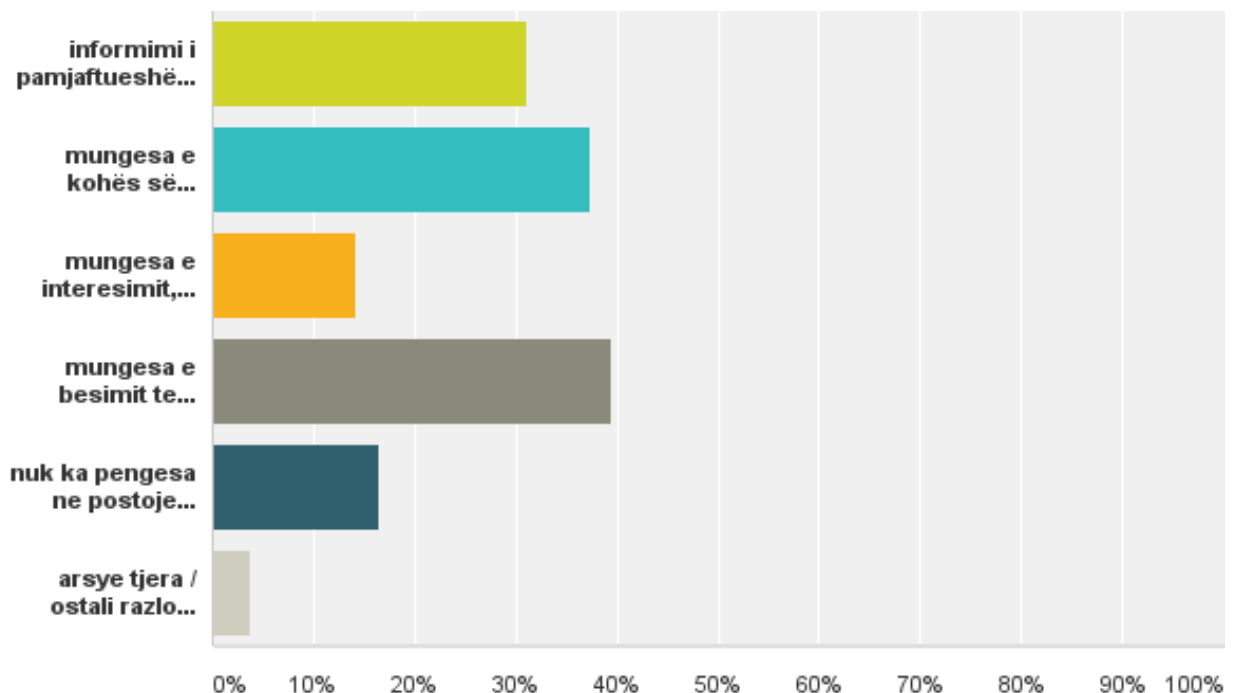
The results show that the dominant sources of motivation for young people are:

- **the acquisition of knowledge, experience and skills: 70%**
- **the desire to make the change: 54%**
- **socializing and belonging to a group: 35%**
- personal satisfaction: 30%
- travel: 29%
- fun: 26%
- earnings potential: 18%

In contrast with widely accepted opinion that the dominant motivator for youth participation across the region may lie in their opportunism and individual interests related to income, the results show that for the most of the respondents, the development of key competences for personal, social and professional development is the reason for their involvement and activism in addition to recognition by the group of peers. This finding is rather encouraging opening various opportunities for the future programming based on growth and development of the social capital of youth.

However, there are diverse types of barriers to youth participation across the region, as stated below.

➤ **BARRIERS to active participation of young people**



1. Lack of TRUST in the state and the possibility of changes

2. Lack of FREE TIME

3. Lack of INFORMATION

4. Lack of interest, will and motivation

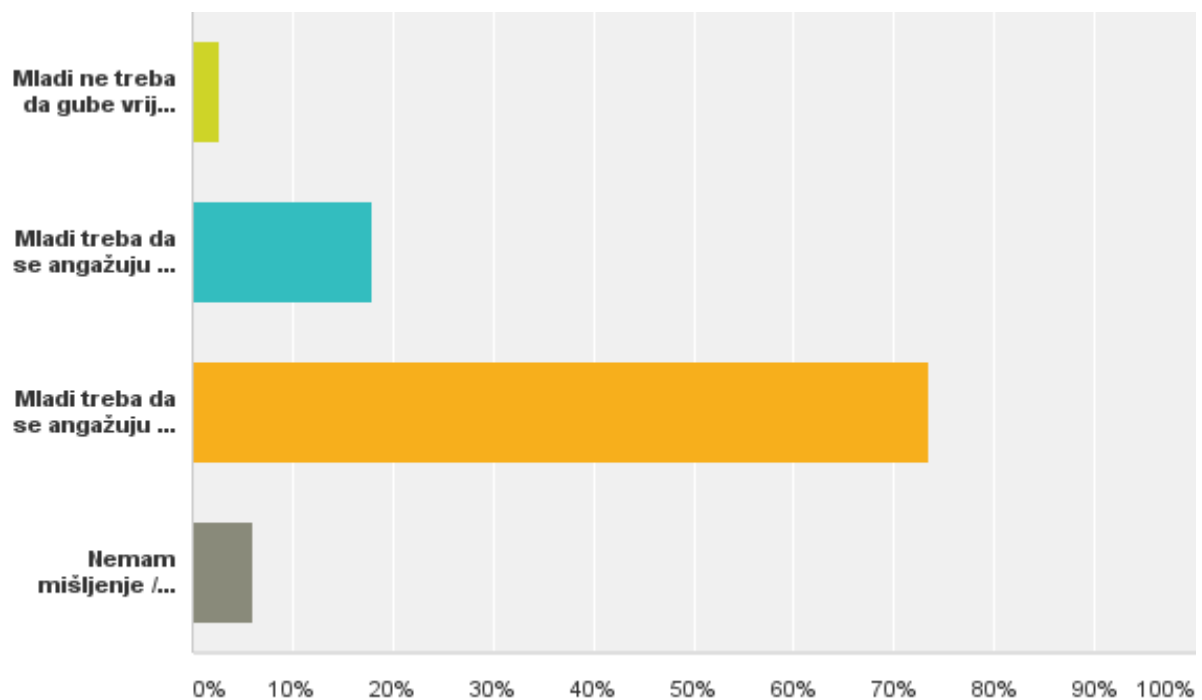
In addition, 16% of young people stated that there are **no** barriers.

The results show that the barriers to active youth participation in the region are in line with the European trends, being reflected in the **lack of trust**, especially in its institutionalized forms. On

the other hand, external pressure of harsh socio-economic conditions that young people are experiencing across the region makes time available for an active social engagement rather limited. More widely, the value of youth active participation in transitional societies needs further recognition and support especially by the relevant governmental institutions. Further attention should be given to development of tools and programmes addressing issues related to youth information, and planning/organizing leisure time of youth in more meaningful manner.

➤ **Young people's engagement in the non-governmental / youth organizations**

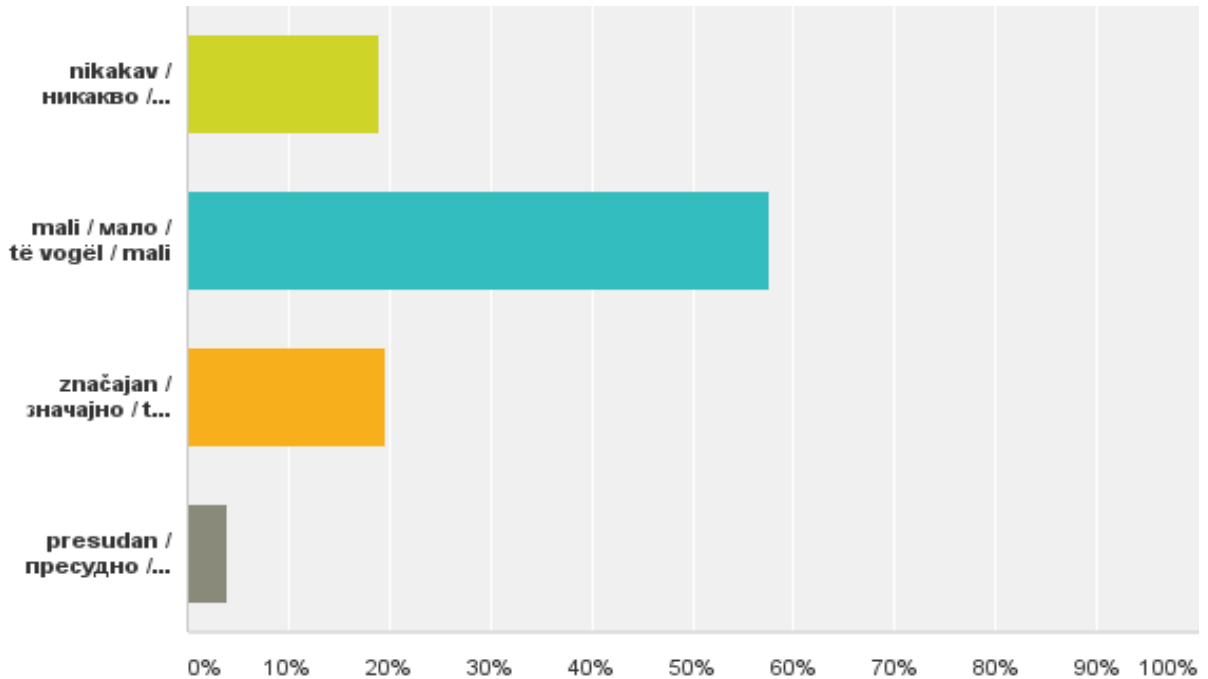
Young people were asked whether it is important for youth to be involved in non-governmental/youth organizations (and why), while the results show that civic engagement of young generations largely contributes (at least in general terms) to the social change.



- 73 % Young people should be engaged to contribute to social change
- 18 % Young people need to be engaged if it will bring some benefit
- 3% Young people should not waste time on it

➤ **How young people see themselves in society, THE IMPACT they have on social change in the local community/country**

In addition to previous question respondents were asked to assess the power of young people to create social change.



- **58% SMALL IMPACT**
- **19% NO IMPACT**
- 20% significant impact

The majority of respondents believe that young people **do not have power** to make impact on the social changes in their communities or countries. This result complements the previous findings in the sense that young people clearly recognize the role of youth organizations as a vital form of supporting their empowerment and the development of competencies for creating social change, while their actual impact on the complex processes of social transformation is rather low. Furthermore, the resources of youth as the social group might not be taken in consideration by the state institutions, as illustrated in following testimonies:

“Young people are rarely asked for anything, and even when asking for their opinion, the same have no major impact on decisions”.

“Young people make small changes in the community, and there are examples of good practice of teamwork and cooperation, but the largest change is personal change”.

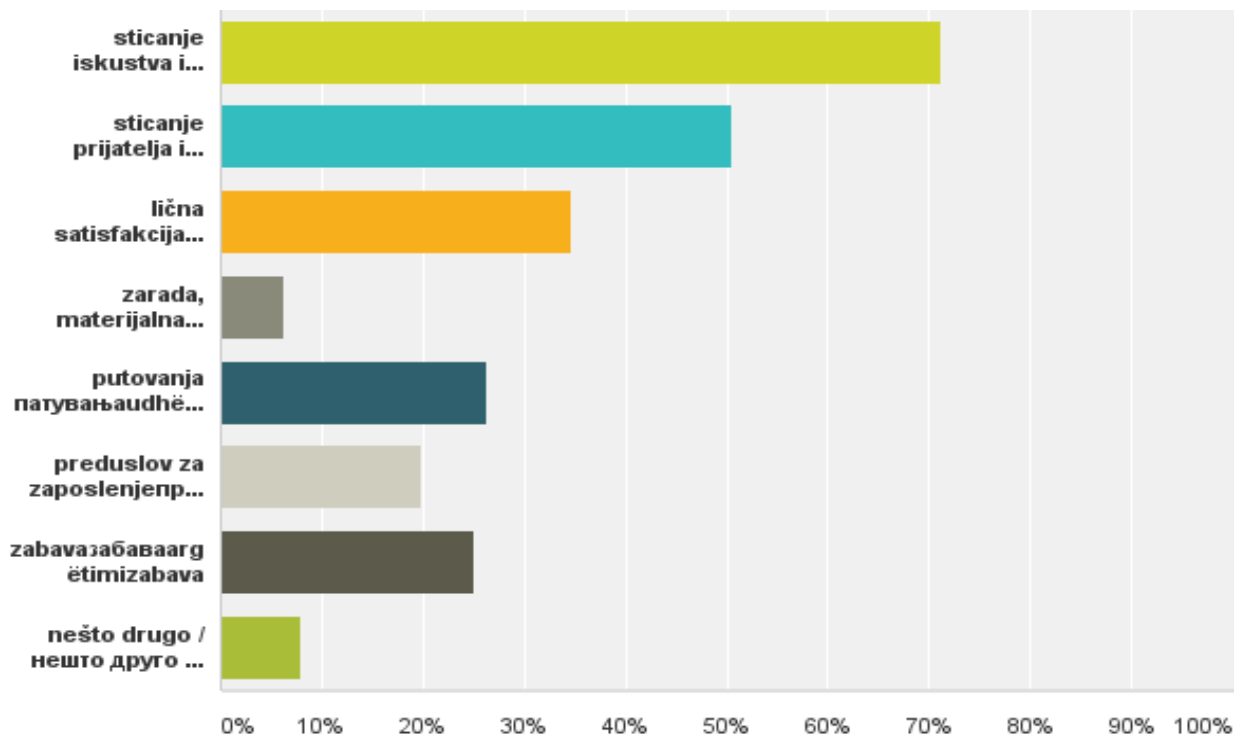
➤ Young people's engagement in voluntary activities

From the total number of respondents, 69% of them participated in voluntary activities in their local communities, while 25% of them participated in voluntary activities abroad (mostly on short term basis). The results may be interpreted in a way that majority of opportunities for youth involvement in various areas of the public, political, cultural or even economic life are based on voluntarism.

➤ MOTIVATION of young people for volunteering

The dominant sources of motivation for volunteering are:

- **The acquisition of knowledge, experience and skills: 71%**
- **Making friends and associates: 51%**
- Personal satisfaction: 35%
- Travel: 26%
- Fun: 25%
- Precondition for employment: 20%
- Earnings: 6%



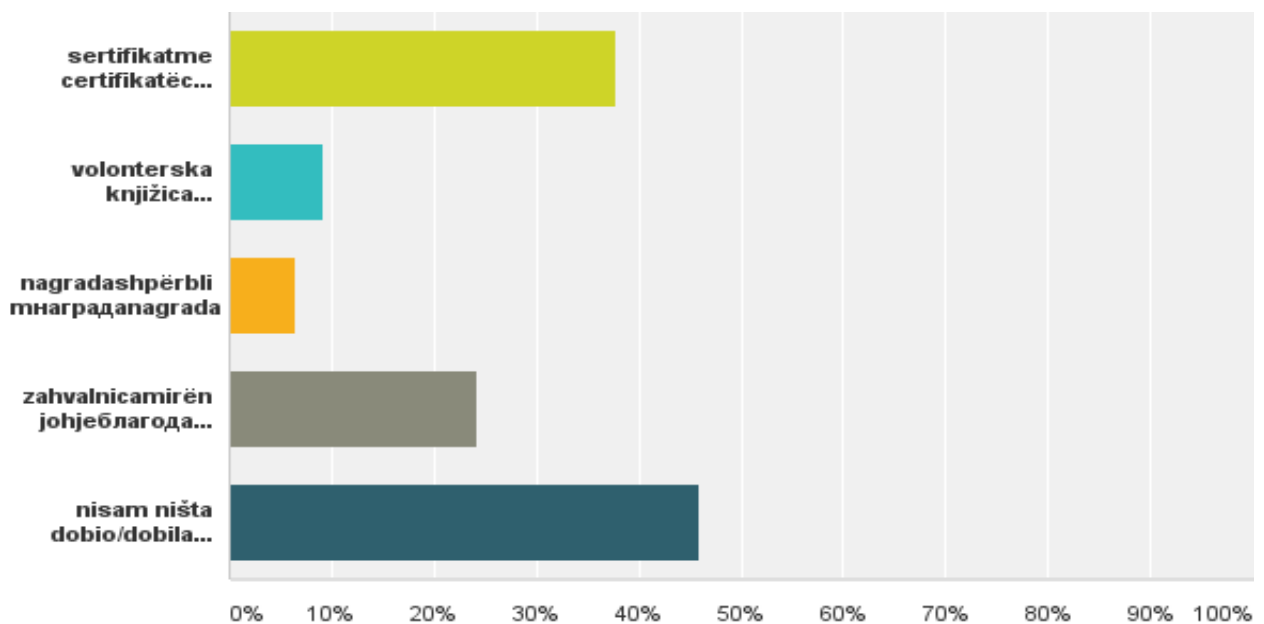
The results suggest that in line with previous findings, young people often see their (volunteering) engagements (mainly in civic organizations) as the way of gaining soft-skills and competencies, some of which are the key to better employability. These findings could provide useful insight for the development of the future programming in this area, especially in regards

to planning professionally managed volunteering programmes. Additionally, emphasizing its social value, large percentage of the respondents see volunteering as a form of a quality leisure time.

➤ **Volunteering experience is (not) valued**

- **46% didn't get any recognition**
- 38% certificates
- 24% certificate of thanks
- 9% voluntary card

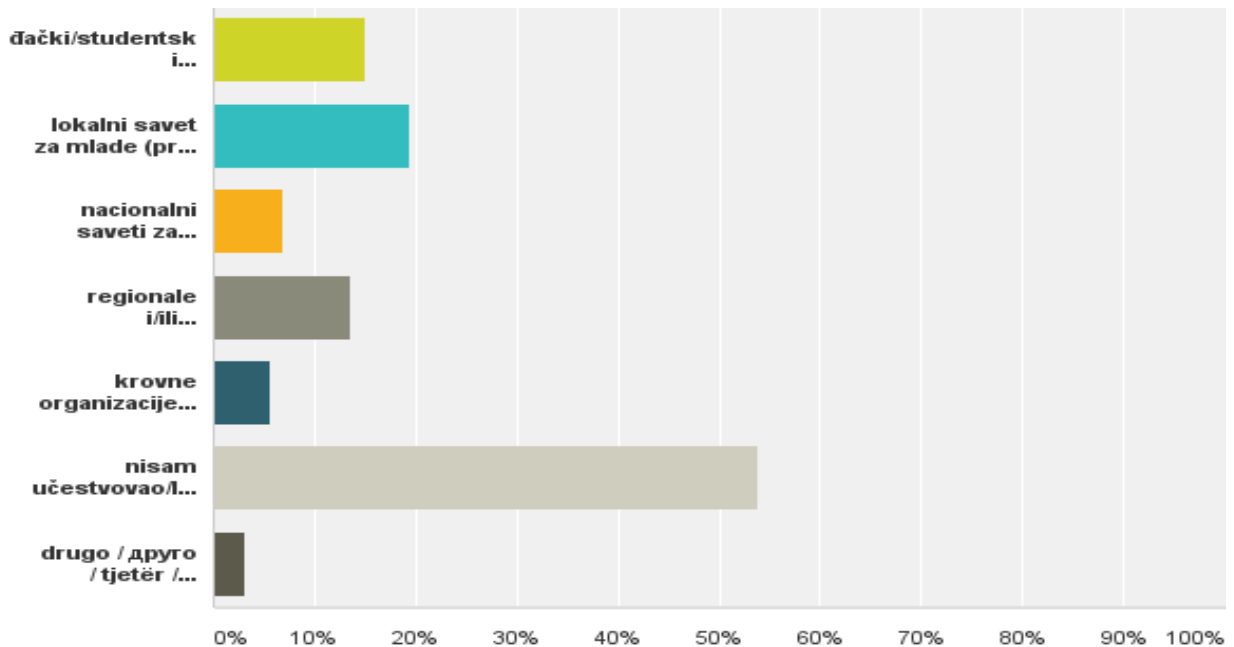
A high percentage of young volunteers did not get any recognition from the organization, and only one third of them received certificates or certificates of thanks. The results indicate low level of recognition and validation of voluntary youth engagements in various types of organizations (usually having questionable level of quality volunteering management), which are supposed to support and build motivation of youth to engage and contribute to society on voluntary basis.



Theme 2: YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

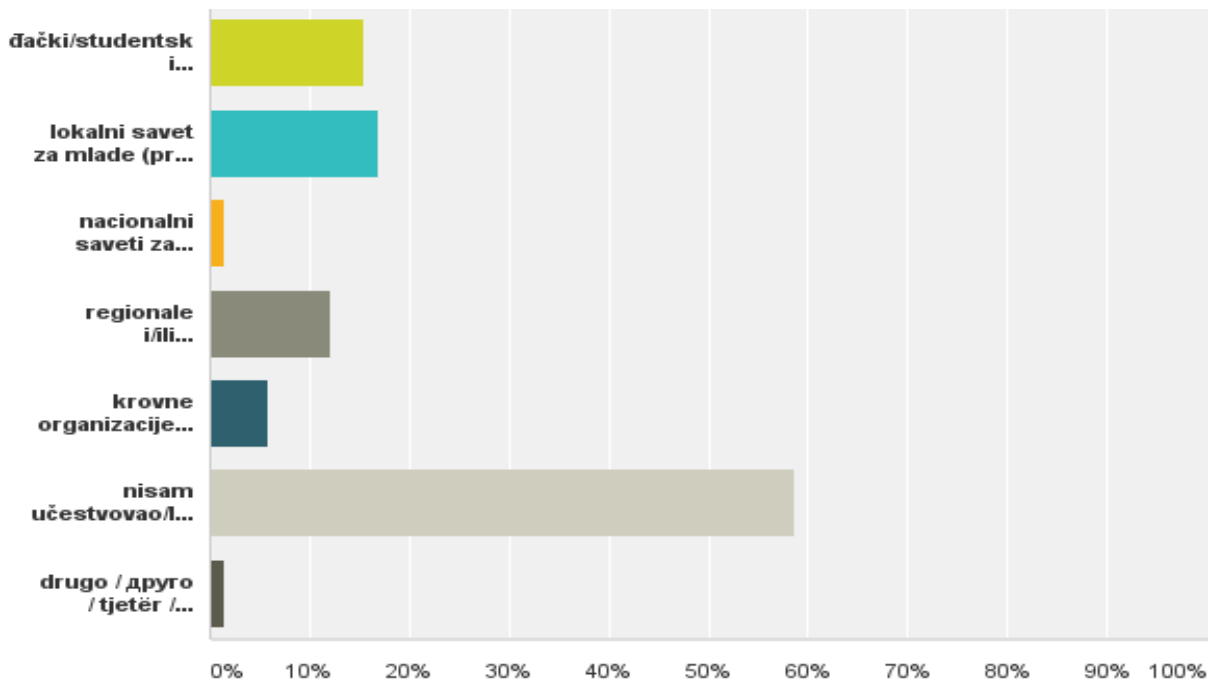
T2C1: Youth participation in formal structures

- Young people participate in the formally recognized structures that represent the interests of young people

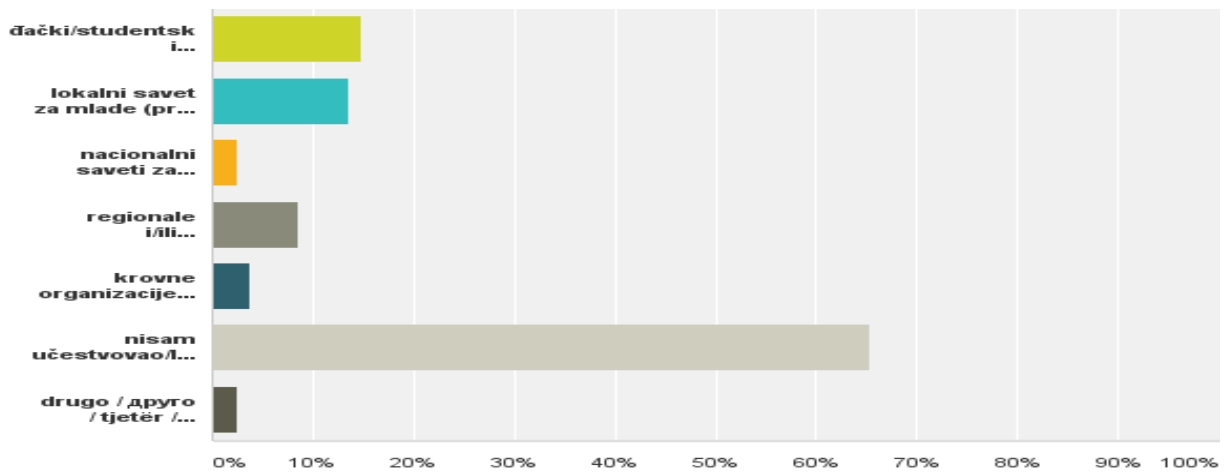


- 54 % did not participate
- 19 % participated in local youth councils
- 15 % participated in pupils/ students parliaments
- 13 % participated in the national/regional umbrella organizations
- 7 % participated in the national youth councils
- 6 % Umbrella youth organizations on European level

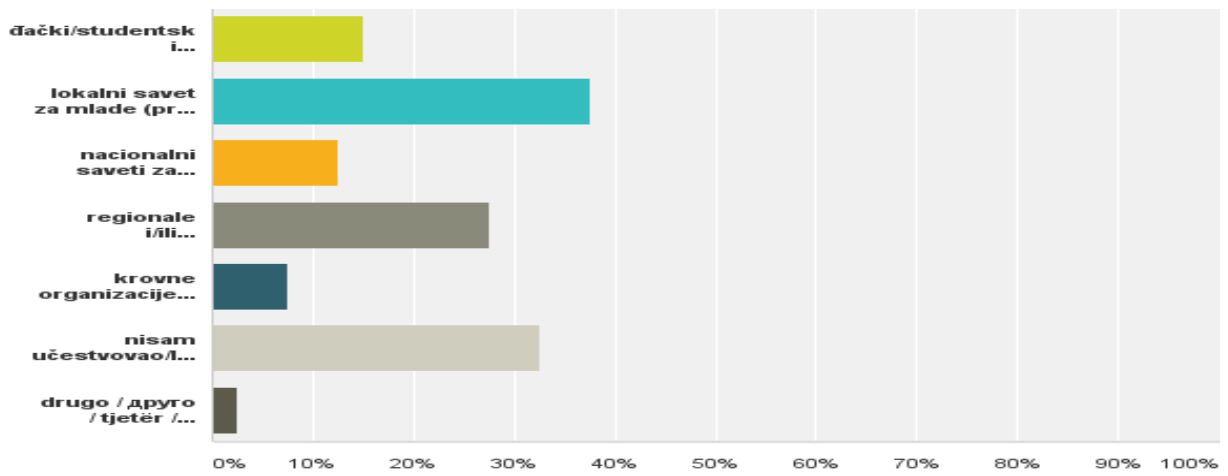
Comparing to high levels of youth participation in civic organizations which was previously registered, the results show that half of the respondents did not have opportunity to participate in any type of the formally recognized structures which are supposed to represent their interests. This can point to the fact that opportunities for youth to participate are rather underdeveloped and limited, as well as that youth does not recognize existing (rather over formalized) mechanisms as meaningful. These results could be also interpreted in the light of low representativeness and transparency of the criteria related to membership in these formally recognized structures (as confirmed in the next question). Interesting insight in the tendencies acknowledged per country, are presented below.



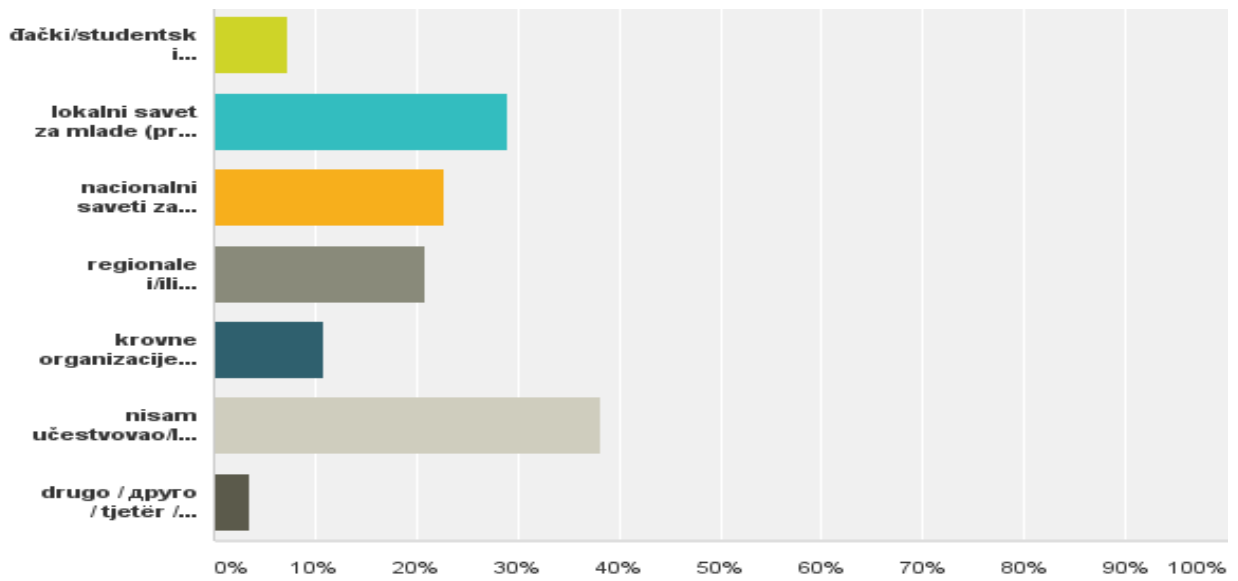
Bosnia and Herzegovina



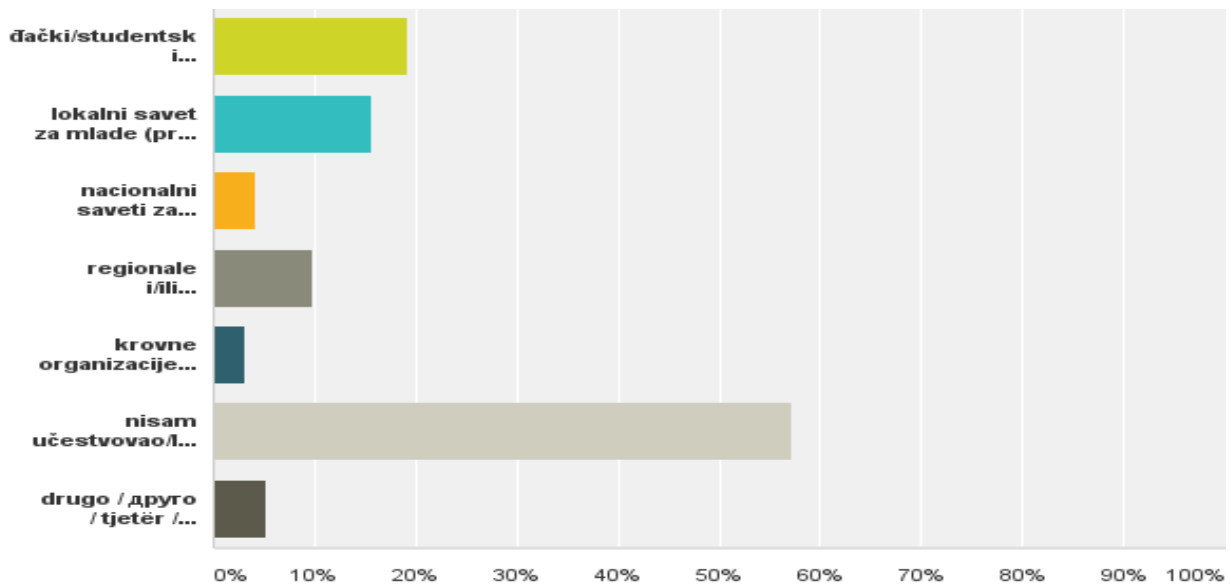
Montenegro



Kosovo*



the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia



Serbia

- Young people were asked if the criteria for the selection of young people in the representative structures are clear/transparent, and consistently applied in practice

Young people said the following:

- 35% had no opinion
- 28% said that criteria for the selection of young representatives are clear and transparent but is inconsistently applied
- 28% said that criteria for the selection of young representatives are not clear and transparent.

The responses of young people indicate that these criteria are primarily not clear and transparent while the most of the young people are not familiar with them. This kind of practice contributes to elitism of youth participation, where young people with limited competences and opportunities are put aside.

Theme 3: YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

T3C1: Youth participation in youth policy development and implementation

- Does community / country have the conditions for inclusion of young people in the decision-making processes

Young people were asked whether their local community or the state has the conditions for the inclusion of youth in decision-making processes, and **64%** of them consider that there are **NO conditions**.

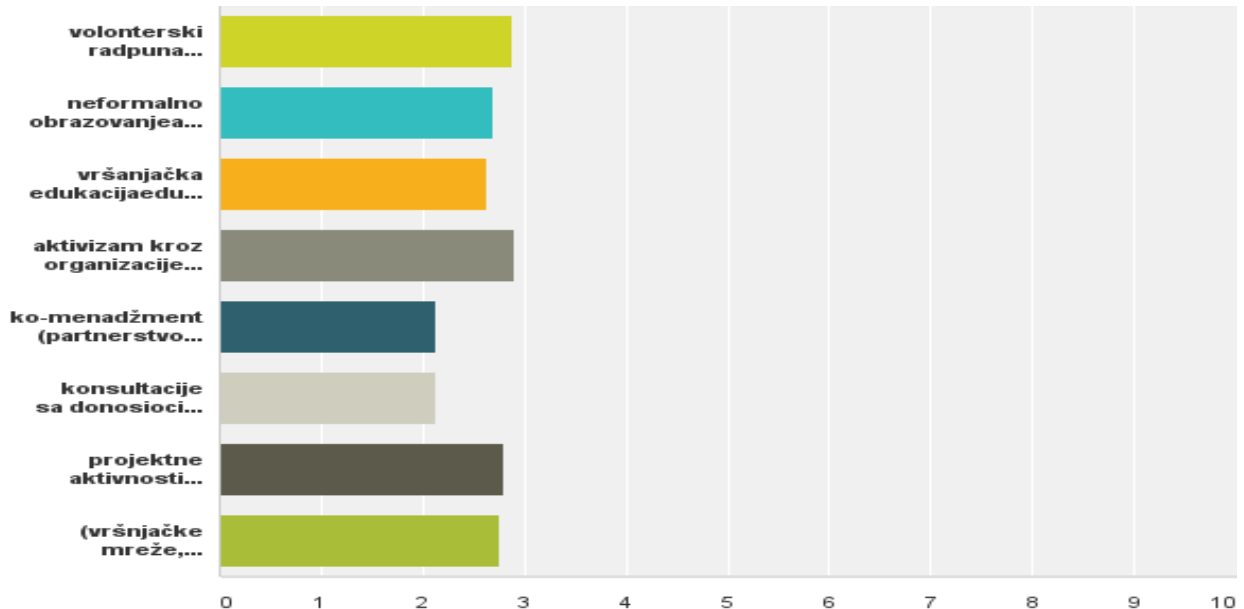
➤ **Are the young people INVOLVED in the decision-making process in the local community/country**

Young people are asked are they involved in the decision-making processes at the local or at the national level, and **74%** of them stated that they are **NOT** involved.

The results indicate that the situation is almost the same in all targeted countries, as well as that young people's participation in the decision-making processes is not sufficiently valued by society and institutions, therefore, preconditions for inclusion and co-management are not sufficiently developed.

➤ **AREAS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION in which young people are involved**

The data gathered in this regard, illustrate and confirm aforementioned tendencies in the same direction.



Forms of youth participation where young people are mostly involved:

- **activism through organizations / youth clubs**
- **volunteer work**
- **project activities**
- non formal education
- peer Education
- peer networks, petitions, support groups, international meetings

Forms of youth participation where young people are the least involved:

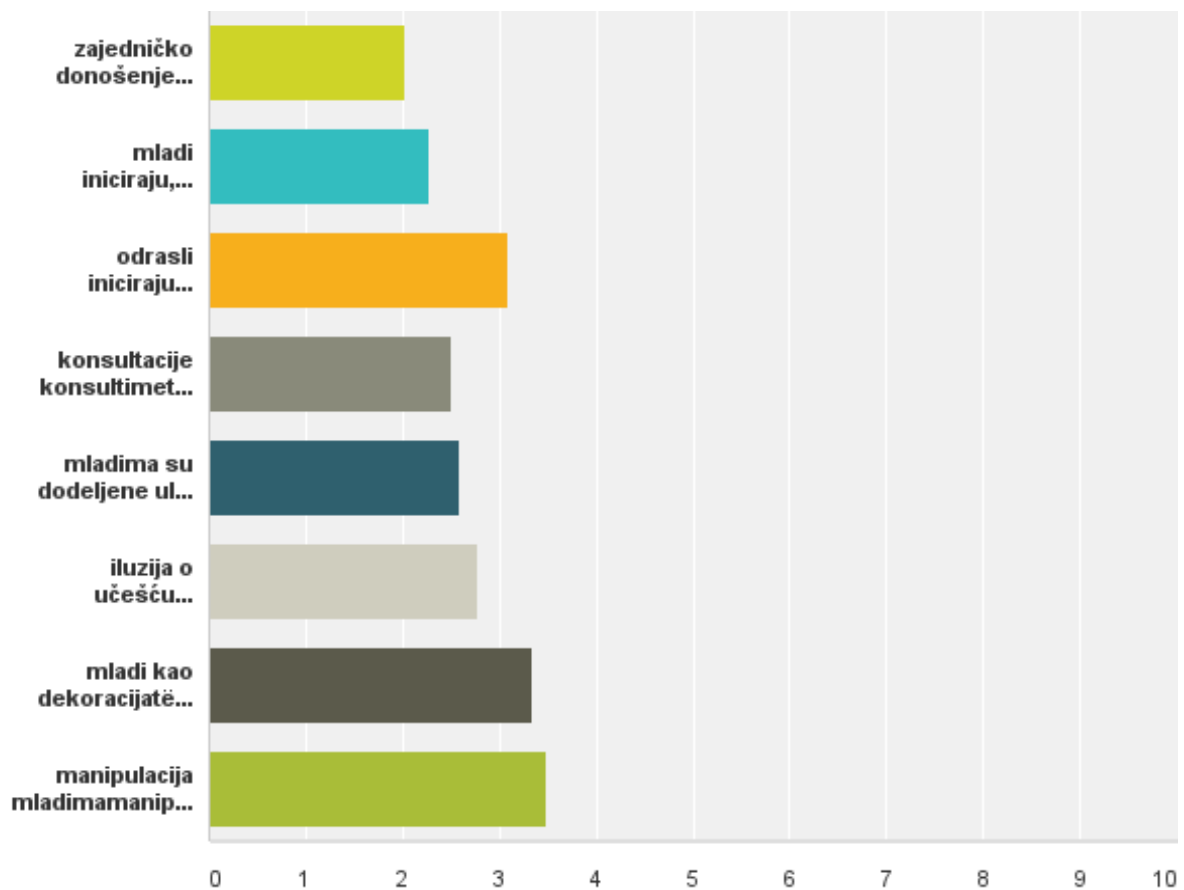
- co-management
- consultations with decision makers

➤ **LEVEL of youth participation in the decision-making processes (according to theory of Roger Hart – Ladder of Youth Participation)**

The respondents were asked to rank the level of youth participation within existing forms of the decision-making.

The results indicate that the most common forms of youth participation are in direct relation to the quality of support young people receive.

The forms of youth participation where young people are passive and treated as implementers or users of the programmes and services are the most frequently practiced comparing to the forms in which young people are involved in the decision making processes and management of the processes and resources on equal basis.

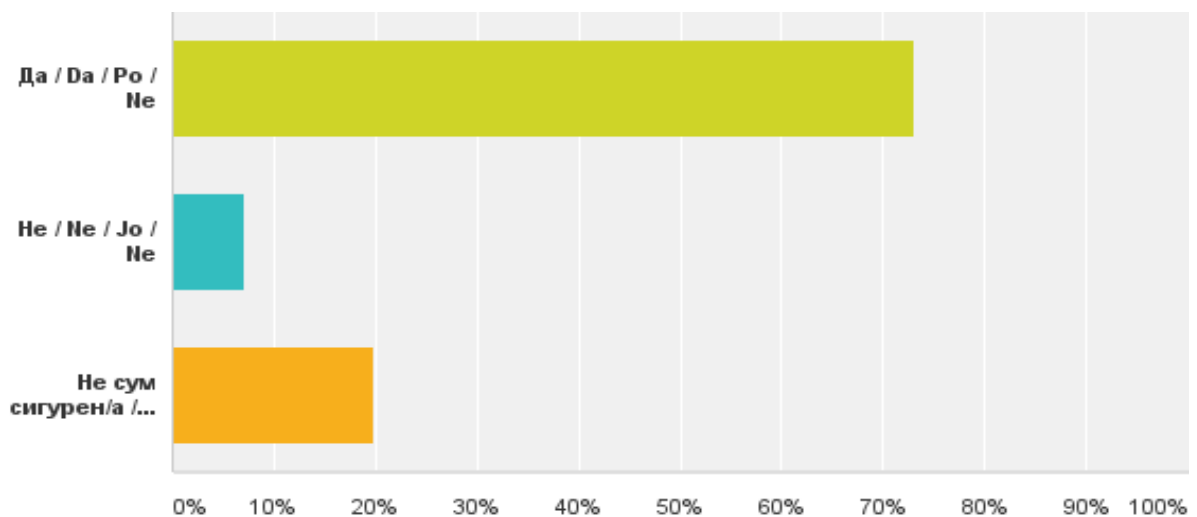


Level of youth participation and co-operation with the decision-makers is rated as follows:

- **manipulation of youth**
- **young as decoration**
- **adults initiate activities**
- the illusion of participation - "tokenism"
- young people are assigned roles and tasks
- consultation
- young initiate, decide and implement actions
- joint decision-making on an equal basis

➤ **Young people’s contribution to the change of their position in society through involvement in youth policies**

Respondents were asked whether they believe that their participation in youth policies (creation, implementation and monitoring of local, national, regional youth policy, relevant laws, etc.) contributes to change of their position in society. Importantly, **73%** of them believe that their involvement in public policies targeting youth **CAN** contribute to the change.



T3C2: Youth participation in politics

➤ **Opinion on the INVOLVEMENT of young people in political organizations**

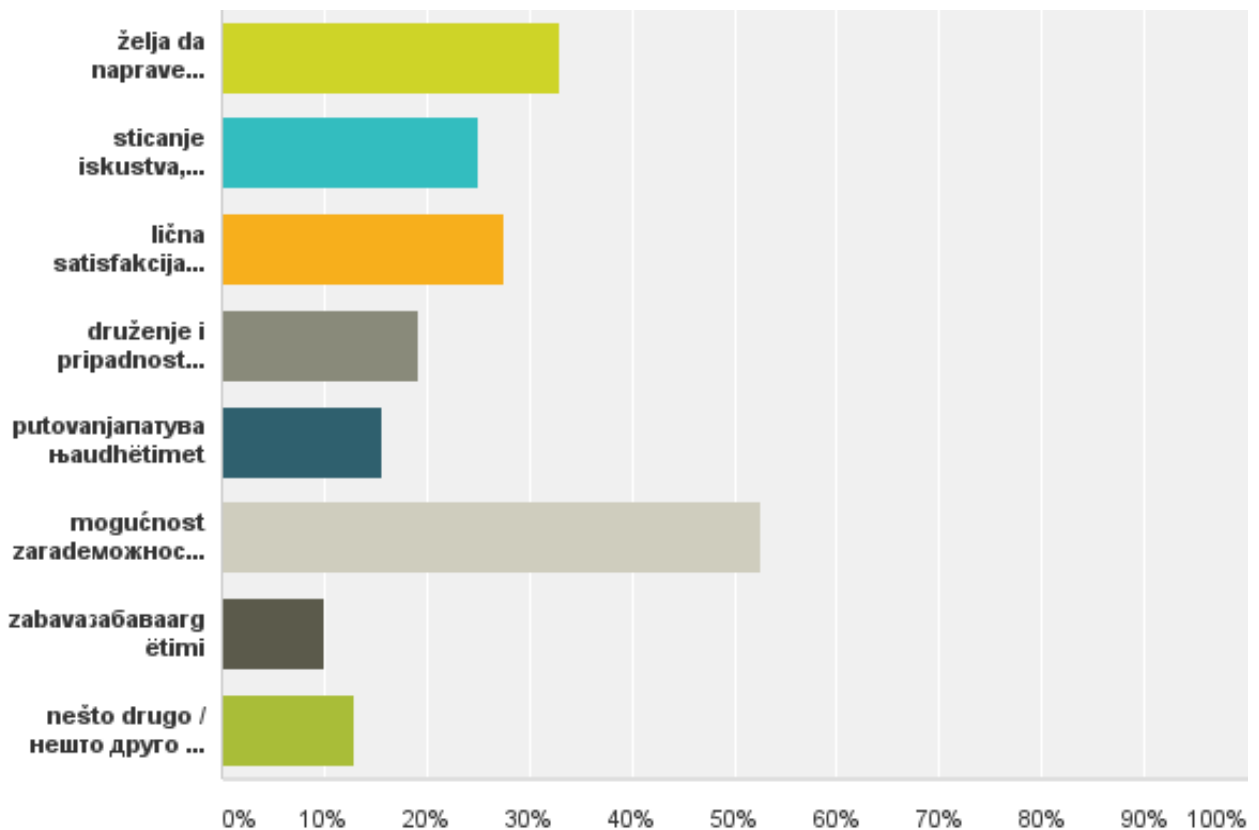
Respondents were asked to give an opinion on whether young people should participate in political organizations, while 71% of them responded positively, meaning that young people should be engaged to contribute to social change through political organizations.

➤ **Young people ACTIVE in the youth branches of political parties**

- **83%** of respondents are **NOT** active in youth branches of political parties in the entire sample.

Results by country show that young people ARE ACTIVE in youth branches of political parties in the following proportion: Bosnia and Herzegovina (23%), Montenegro (13%), Kosovo* (29%), the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (12%), Serbia (13%).

➤ **MOTIVATION for participation of young people in the youth branches of political parties**



The dominant sources of motivation for political participation are:

- **earnings potential: 52%**
- **the desire to make the change: 33%**
- **personal satisfaction: 28%**
- the acquisition of knowledge, experience and skills: 25%
- socializing and belonging to a group: 19%
- travel: 15%
- fun: 10%

Results by country show that in all countries the key motive is earnings potential (44-58%), while the results in Kosovo* show that 53% of young people are involved in political organizations with the desire to create change and 46% of them with the motive of gaining experience.

➤ **Participation of young people in the last elections at local / cantonal / regional or national level**

Overall results indicate that the **61%** of respondents (age over 18) have participated in last elections. The results by country confirm that a significant number of young respondents participated in political elections: Bosnia and Herzegovina (63%), Montenegro (52%), Kosovo* (71%), The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (64%), Serbia (57%).

Theme 4: YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

T4C1: Participation of youth with fewer opportunities

➤ **Belonging to the SOCIALLY VULNERABLE GROUPS**

From the total sample 44% of respondents identified themselves as the members of socially vulnerable groups in the following proportion:

- **18% social status (low-income households, individuals who are not included in the labor market / education)**
- 9% ethno-national belonging (minorities)
- 9% Place of residence
- 5% Sexual orientation
- 3% Disability

Results by country show the percentage of respondents declaring themselves as the members of socially vulnerable groups based on **social status (not in employment / education/training, low income households)** are following: Bosnia and Herzegovina (30%), Serbia (15%), Montenegro (13%), the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (10%), and Kosovo* (8%).

Results by country showing percentage of respondents declaring themselves as the members of socially vulnerable groups based on **place of residence (urban/rural area)** are following: Kosovo* (29%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (12%), Serbia (8%), Montenegro and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (5%).

Results by country showing percentage of respondents declaring themselves as the members of socially vulnerable groups based on **ethnicity** are following: Kosovo* (25%), Montenegro (12%), Serbia (9%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (8%), and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (6 %).

These specific data could be interpreted and potentially used by the local authorities and LDAs in various targeted countries in order to plan approaches and more diversified/tailored programmes and services addressing needs of youth with fewer opportunities based on various criteria.

➤ **Young people from socially vulnerable groups faced with obstacles for active participation in the community**

From the total sample the respondents identified obstacles for active participation in the following proportion:

- **35% insufficient funding**
- **28% lack of support**
- 24% lack of information
- 12% lack of space
- 12% lack of conditions.

Results per targeted countries in this regard are the following:

	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Montenegro	Kosovo*	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Serbia
insufficient funding	41%	37%	45%	32%	30%
lack of support	30%	20%	50%	26%	26%
lack of information	30%	18%	29%	14%	24%
lack of space	16%	10%	25%	9%	9%
lack of conditions	15%	12%	38%	10%	10%

The data describing main barriers to active participation of socially vulnerable youth reflect a lack of institutional support and funding and could be potentially used to inform future programming but also development of (local) youth policies and services, but also in order to plan specific programs of youth work.

FOCUS GROUPS

For the purpose of exploring specific aspects of young peoples' attitudes and experiences of active participation, eight focus groups were conducted and facilitated by the local research teams with support of the regional experts. Focus groups were held in the following cities: Subotica and Knjazevac (Serbia); Niksic (Montenegro); Vevcani (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia); Prijedor, Zavidovici and Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina); and Peja (Kosovo). Participants were **young people** with from different backgrounds (young people active in youth organizations, in youth branches of political parties, with experience in participation in formal youth structures, as well as young people who are not active).



Regional youth forum for local democracy, Subotica 2015



Training in Knjazevac

The results of the focus group were confidential, and used to complement findings from the survey in order to create the recommendations for improvement of conditions for youth participation across the Balkans, and to support future programming of LDAs.

➤ **The role young people play in the process of social change in local community/country**

Within the plenary session, at the beginning of each focus group, participants answered following three questions:

Q1: What is in your opinion the role of youth in the process of social change in your community?

The answers to this question have much to say about the values that young people (as well as society in general) follow and practice. Interestingly, the focus group participants recognized the roots of the culture of participation in the family, and in the values that young people acquire in various social environments. However, their opinion on the institutionalized forms of (political)

participation as well as of the culture of participation in the societies across the region is rather negative, as illustrated below:

“I believe that young people have a minor role to play in society, although there are structures for their participation on paper.” (Subotica)

“It is very small influence of young people, in general they don’t show initiatives, they finish high school and no word from them, or finish faculty and they are stuck without work”. “Young people are indifferent, with lack of initiative, and when they have opportunity to say something or make a change, they are quiet.” (Niksic)

“My observation is that influence of youngsters in political parties is minimal. That influence lasts only during pre-election campaign, and ends with them. Neither opinion of young people is accepted, they are not given opportunity for progress, and in very rare cases if there is some corruptive string they can achieve something.” (Niksic)

The **causes** for quite low youth involvement in public life are seen in various internal and external factors such as:

“Youth don't voice their concerns; they hesitate and have a lack braveness”. (Peja/Peć)

“In our society the submissive mind-set dominates, that has been traditional for many centuries, and such a mind-set reflects on family as social group. This leads to the lack of ambition, especially among young people, because they are a product of socialization in their family and other social groups which impose “do not rock the boat” way of thinking. In any case, many problems in our society are lack of will, ambition and interest to make a change. Everybody is passing the ball and blaming others.” (Niksic)

“Youngsters are the ones that need to make an effort and take initiative (in finding jobs), but they are used to get everything done by their parents, and to doing nothing by themselves. That situation reflects in the future on their lack of willingness to participate in the different spheres of their community.” (Niksic)

The participants also referred to changing behavioral patterns and (rather negative) **effects** that active engagement of youth in various participatory processes can have:

“An overall experience is that even when young people come to power and have the opportunity of making decisions, they forget the rest of young people, they forget to do something for them”. (Knjazevac)

“Young people need to be politically active, to be "in the loop of things", to meet people, to monitor developments, and it is up to each person whether they would be changed when they

enter into circle of people in politics and whether they will strive to be involved in decision making processes for the common good or will they look only for their own interest.” (Knjazevac)



Focus group, Peja/Peć

Q2: What is your experience or what do you think - what influence young people have in the decision-making process on the issues that concern them within CSOs (youth organizations) and /or political organizations?

Answers to this question indicate different experiences of young people in exercising their right to participate in youth organizations and youth branches of the political parties. But what prevails (in line with the results gathered in the survey) is the notion that the level and quality of youth participation is quite low making them mainly consumers and not active partners in the decision making processes. It seems however, that the situation is relatively more flexible and stimulating in the civic organizations comparing to the formalized participative structures.

“Youth need to be active in CSO's and other mechanism that gives them opportunity to be an important element of decision making process.” (Peja/Peć)

“Our experience with CSOs is that young people can influence decision making processes in CSOs. It is only logical since they plan activities for young people so they consult us on this, ask for our opinions and adopt our ideas. Even more, they often delegate tasks of running some programs where we make decisions for us, and they only giving us directions or are there for advice and guidance. We also write our own projects every year and we make all decisions within that process.” (Knjazevac)

“Everything that we have done with CSOs, had the positive outcome. They meet our needs, respect us more as equal partners and, above all, we have much easier communication with them, while with the local authorities and institutions we have a much more difficult relationship.” (Knjazevac)

Yet, there are certain challenges for youth engagement in CSOs as well for both mainstreaming youth and those from vulnerable situations:

“Not every CSO is transparent enough with information about joining possibilities and activities.” (Peja/Peć)

“A number of young Roma are willing to participate in the work of organizations that are dealing with question that concerns them. They want to participate on trainings and seminars, but they have a problem of understanding the theme that is being brought up, because of low education.” (Niksic)

“Reason that there is such lower percentage of active young people is that the low number of organizations wants to take into account their opinions, there are some exemptions, but that is rare. We got impression that young people are exploited for someone’s fees, which is more than frequently. Youth are being used in political purposes as well.” (Niksic)

“Young people run away from volunteerism, because they don’t see any benefits from it. Problem is that someone’s bad experiences lead to situation where young people are not willing to enter any organization.” (Niksic)



Focus group, LDA Mostar

Q3: Are young people perceived as equal partners ('resource') in the decision-making process on the issues that concern them in your community or country? Why?

Majority of the participants of focus groups conducted across the region claimed that young people are **not** fundamentally recognized as equal partners. Arguments listed below reflect that young people perceive their position in the decision-making processes as **unfavourable** and very often **instrumentalised** in the social context.

“Youth is given power only in small matters.” (Peja/Peć)

“Young people are a resource whenever that fits into someone’s agenda, politicians mostly, but also when some institutions and some CSOs are implementing projects and they need to have young people involved. In general, I don’t think there is no continuity in how young people are perceived, sometimes they are a resource sometimes they are a problem and the reason for this is that we lack any stable system here.” (Knjazevac)

“To be honest, 90% of today’s youth I would never considered as equal partner in any dialogue.” (Niksic)

“Young people are not perceived as equal members of the society - they are underestimated, they are considered to ‘know nothing’, like they are the very bottom of the society. Young people nowadays have problem with basic knowledge, without capacities to be equal in any fight for their rights.” (Niksic)

“If young people could be perceived as equal, they must have certain knowledge, be well informed, but there is also a problem of motivation, and life without a goal. We are not raised to create goals, raised on collective spirit, where older child is creating path for young one. We see that every day and how can we cope with that. Values are changed, authorities do not exist.” (Niksic)

“We were consulted for some issues but not with obligations that the decision-makers will implement suggestions into the final decision”. (Vevcani)

“We are all members of political party’s youth. Within political parties, only some of them are part of the political decision-making, depending on the status within the party and the type of political party.” (Vevcani)

Furthermore, the local researchers discussed with local youth groups all four thematic areas which were a part of the online questionnaire: youth civic participation and activism; youth participation and representation; youth participation in decision making processes and youth

participation and social exclusion. The themes were discussed from the perspective of OPPORTUNITIES and BARRIERS.



Focus group, LDA Prijedor

➤ **Barriers to youth participation**

Within this section specific testimonies of young people will be listed, as well as their perspective on the issue of barriers to the active participation of mainstreaming youth but also those belonging to vulnerable groups. In general, the participants did not have a problem of recognizing and naming different types of barriers.

A) What type of INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL BARRIERS to youth participation in the decision making processes can be recognized in your community/country?

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Vevcani:

- The lack of financial resources and financial support from the institutions.
- Apathy among the youngsters caused by the isolation and living in small communities.
- Lack of education of civic engagement and opportunities for participation.
- The strongest barrier was overcoming the stereotypes and prejudices towards youth involved in political parties.
- The lack of will is the most evident problem that this community is facing. The lack of will is noticeable in almost every factor. The municipality, the youngsters, even the institutions. The participation is reduced mostly to décor.
-

BiH, Mostar:

- Young people are not motivated because they are often bound in a real situation. Many of them have knowledge but the state does not support them financially. They are not sufficiently informed. Young people do not know how to recognize opportunities for themselves.
- Youth are lacking motivation for acquiring knowledge on the other hand.

BiH, Zavidovici.

- More attention should be given to involvement of young people in the social processes, while this could be achieved by engaging them in the ways that are interesting and innovative.

Kosovo*, Peja/Peć.

- Youth need to be more active in all mechanisms that give them a real opportunity to be active in the public life and in the processes of decision making. Young people should be recognized as real partner and not only as potential category of voters.

Montenegro, Niksic.

- Political parties use young people for their own interests.
- Youngsters see political parties as shortcut to success, not as tool for protecting their greater interests.
- Lack of ambitions and submissive culture – young people are ‘asleep’ and overprotected by their parents.
- Young people are seen as incompetent, and not as a driving force of a society.
- There is question of vanity – ‘adults’ do not want to hear what young people have to say. It is seen as an attack on their work, because "who is he/her to teach me what to do".
- Young people does not know how to make goals, and don't even think about that.
- The municipality does nothing in terms of improving living conditions for young people.
- For the change young people need to have grater knowledge, bigger motivation and clear goals.
- Young people are passive, apathetic.
- It is known in advance that positions are gained through connections and money, and there is no desire to learn or to fight for a job.



Focus group, LDA Knjazevac

B) What type of barriers to youth participation are specifically characteristic for youth in vulnerable situations?

Montenegro, Niksic

- Only thing that is open for vulnerable groups are CSOs.
- There is a plenty of organizations dealing with vulnerable groups, but they are focused on personal interest of coordinators.
- Customary law is above the state law, concerning Roma community, and it obstruct them to integrate in the social processes.

BiH, Zavidovici.

- There is a problem with lack of money or sometimes lack of IT equipment for accessing social networks.
- Roma minority, they have a problem with existing prejudices and with lack of education due to the fact that their parents didn't/couldn't send them to school.
- Regarding youth from vulnerable situations, a lot of progress could be achieved by applying the principles of positive discrimination, and working constantly on fighting the stereotypes and prejudice.

Serbia, Subotica

- Unavailability of information for young people from rural areas.
- Lack of computers and internet for young people with inferior social status.
- Not adapted transportation for young people with disabilities.
- Issues in finding job, and security issues for young people with different sexual orientation.



Study visit in the Parliament of Montenegro, Podgorica 2015

➤ Opportunities for youth participation

Unlike barriers, the most of participants **had** certain difficulties in recognizing and naming the specific features that provide opportunities for the youth to actively participate in society. **Identifying opportunities** for youth from socially vulnerable groups proved to be especially **difficult**. Some of the opportunities identified are reflected in services for the young, as well as in the different structures of youth participation at the local, regional and national level as it will be illustrated below.

Serbia, Subotica:

- Young people identified the following opportunities: pupils' and students' parliaments; national union of secondary school parliaments (UNSS); Local Youth Office – municipal youth service; national networks KOMS and NAPOR; OBESSU – Union of National Unions of Secondary school parliaments; EVS programs.

Montenegro, Niksic:

- Young people identified different opportunities for young people in secondary school: school parliament, sports, debates, cultural activities, and humanitarian activities; peer education summer jobs; voluntary activities. Also, they done mapping of opportunities for young people age 18 – 30: participation in activities on their Universities; active involvement in political parties; activities within NGOs; volunteerism; cultural activities; internship and practice; studying abroad; job opportunities; entrepreneurship initiatives; right to vote and to being elected

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Vevcani:

- The focus group participants named the following options: youth center (which is the combination of a youth CSO and a municipality body taking care of the needs of the youth); local school and library; the culture scene in Vevcani; near-by institutions (scouts, youth NGO's, secondary schools).

BiH, Zavidovici:

- Young people identified the following opportunities: volunteering and taking part in the activities of NGO's that are working with youth on different social issues; writing and implementing projects as a part of NGO-s; starting citizens initiatives, petitions, taking part in public debates; participating in political parties, in municipal council, etc.

BiH, Mostar:

- Young people identified different some opportunities for young people participation: local youth council as local umbrella organization offering young people to participate in decision making processes; students union as representative body of students.

Serbia, Knjazevac:

- Young people within focus group identified different opportunities: participation through NGO's; initiatives for youth participation having multiplying effect; funds for youth projects; Civic education in schools.

Kosovo*, Peja/Peć:

- The focus group participants named the following options for youth participation: political parties, NGO's, Youth centers.



Regional youth forum for local democracy, Subotica 2015



YEW Meeting in Mostar

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✦ Long-term marginalization of young people across the Balkans requires immediate and consistent policy measures in societies that are still undergoing democratic transformation. In most of the Balkan countries systematic approach to youth policies in the form of establishment of adequate institutional framework at all levels of governance is necessary, whilst development of specific mid-term and long term strategies and action plans complying with the European priority areas need to be further developed.
- ✦ A general aspiration for a full membership in the European Union poses an important catalyst for the legislative reforms and institution building, albeit different countries are at different stages of youth policy making and establishing relevant institutions. Along the way, substantial support to the process has been provided by the European institutions, the European Non-Governmental Organizations, several European states, and various international organizations (mainly the UN agencies), which play an important role in developing youth policies across the region, creating important impetus for capacity building, networking and research in the youth field.
- ✦ The role of youth - as a social group capable to play a transformative role across societies in the Balkan countries– but is often and traditionally perceived as passive, abstaining and submissive in relation to their local socio/political environment. Therefore, learning through informal and formal education that participation is an essential element of citizenship in a democratic society, not only as political participation, but also as participation in civil society, policy and decision making, culture and environmental activities. Young generation across the region in this regard has on its disposal more diversified means for practicing active citizenship. An increased scope of opportunities for youth engagement in voluntary activities across the region indicates a level of social capital and networking potential, which can be related to increased potential for social actions and participation among youth.
- ✦ Advancing good practices of engaging youth in consultative and participatory processes with a view to influencing more effectively the national/cross-border and regional co-operation and dialogue on future perspective of the Western Balkans, becomes essential for promoting their role as key actors of youth policies contributing to social and economic development, prosperity and stability. Youth engagement and active participation becomes more than ever a precondition for intrinsic ownership over the democratic reform process and as a guarantee for peace and stability in the Balkans.
- ✦ With some exceptions, the legislative treatment of vulnerable groups has been largely neglected across the region. Apart from unemployment and poverty, discrimination (mainly based on economic status, political affiliation residence and ethnic background), is identified as one of the important issues colouring realities of contemporary youth in the Balkans. A

distinctive factor however, lies in a widespread belief amongst youth that participation requires a particular set of skills including aptitude in interpersonal relations, rhetorical dexterity, and networking ability. Such a perception is even more evident amongst youth experiencing social and political exclusion, most of whom consider an omnipotent political power as alien and intimidating.

✚ Education for active citizenship within the context of powerful political influence and weak democratic institutions is proven to have a pivotal role for making the environment of youth participation more conducive and for the democratic life across the region in general. In order to boost and amplify youth participation in the Balkans, recommendations for policy and practice need to be focusing on the following main areas of improvement:

1. Fostering a shared understanding of democratic participation of young people in public policy/decision making through improving fundamental conditions for youth participatory practice at local/national level thus overcoming the dominant perception of youth as marginalized or passive;

2. Furthering the legislative and institutional framework in support to increased regional mobility in education, youth employment opportunities, entrepreneurship development, social inclusion of marginalized youth groups providing incentives at grass-root level for youth to stay (and not only to leave the country);

3. Developing adequate formal/informal educational platforms for active citizenship through sustainable regional exchange programmes, educational and volunteering opportunities, peer-to-peer exchange, e-learning modules adjusted to diverse youth groups;

4. Encouraging youth inter-cultural dialogue and understanding, through exchange programmes at cross-border and regional level making use existing European practice and through introducing innovative co-operation platforms enabling a constant information flow and effective participation in civil dialogue;

5. Providing accessible co-operation and learning platforms for youth to engage more effectively in democratic reforms and consultation process on EU integration perspective of the Western Balkans.

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