YOUTH POLICIES AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Abstract

Through this research, an account is given of the existing differences in the perceptions of young people about the quality of life, the opportunities that young people have, as well as the ways in which young people make the choices that most affect their future, such as education, profession and personal development, and related to that what their environment offers. The research provides an overview of the biggest challenges faced by young people in different environments at the national level, and through the analysis of the obtained data, the research builds a comparative picture of the perceptions of the opportunities in the lives of young people in smaller and larger settlements in our country.

Young people aged 15 to 29, who are the target group of this research, are a category of citizens that the state rarely sees separately from other categories of citizens. Even when it comes to creating policies aimed at young people, the state often takes a unified approach instead of putting into perspective the needs of young people from different backgrounds, such as young people from rural areas and small towns, young people with disabilities and young people from families with low incomes.

With this in mind, it is easy to assume that young people whose "measures" are not used to make policies and solutions have fewer choices when it comes to educational opportunities, further opportunities for personal development and progress, opportunities for self-expression, as well as participation in cultural events.

The lack of properly created policies for young people, in the field of education, employment or social protection, the low functionality of the institutions, contribute to the increase in the degree of youth emigration from the Republic of North Macedonia. Emigration, dissatisfaction, as well as the lack of communication about the active involvement of young people in democratic processes, are part of the factors that affect the stagnation of the social capital of young people in our country during the last ten years[1]. The absence of modern policies, strategies and documents that will improve the position of young people, through their effective involvement in decision-making in the educational process, at the local and national level, is something that has been a challenge for educational, local and national authorities over the years.

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[1] 10 years of the status quo, Youth Social Capital Survey, Youth Education Forum, 2020

Introduction

the latest changes and improvements in the field of youth involvement, consultation and activation in decision-making processes by young people can be seen in the wave of changes that caused the student and high school protests in the period 2014-2016. This was the basis for starting the change in the systemic involvement of young people in decision-making within higher education institutions (through the adoption of the new Law on Higher Education), preceded the creation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, as well as the reopening on the issue of changes in the Law on secondary education (which will guarantee the participation of secondary school students in making decisions within schools and the educational process).

Another significant circumstance that has a serious impact on the condition and position of young people in the Republic of North Macedonia is the COVID-19 crisis that has permeated all segments of social life. During this period, young people were one of the most affected groups of citizens. Starting from the complete change of the educational process, seriously aggravating the position of (persons in general) young people with disabilities[2], increasing youth economic instability and lack of institutional support that young people need, are just some of the challenges that the crisis has brought to young people, and for which adequate systemic solutions have yet to be found.[3]

A large number of studies show that young people involved in activities in the local community have multiple benefits: psychological, social and cognitive. On the other hand, 90% of young people in North Macedonia have never been a part of a civic/non-governmental organization or initiative that works on problems related to society, while only 20% of them can imagine joining any of the activities in the future, of a civil/non-governmental organization or initiative. [4]Additionally, according to the Macedonia Youth Development Index, 76.1% of young people have never volunteered.[5]

1. Current legal framework governing youth policies and youth participation

According to the legal framework, in the Republic of North Macedonia, youth participation means the inclusion of young people in making decisions that are of key importance for them, active participation of young people by

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[2]See: "The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on persons with disabilities in North Macedonia", Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, 2021, https://mhc.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/vlijanieto-na -kovid-19-vrz-licata-so-poprechenost.pdf

[3]More in: "Youth in Crisis", MOF, Reactor, ZMAI and CSO group, 2020: https://mof.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Mladi-vo-kriza-2.0-Proshirena-verzija .pdf

[4] https://mof.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WFD-26-FINAL-MK-za-web.pdf

[5] https://segaorg.mk/images/pdf/INDEX_MK.pdf

generating ideas and proposals for improving the position of young people in society, as well as active citizenship and community contribution by young people. However, active participation in itself does not mean only involvement in a certain activity, but it is a process in which young people identify their needs, seek solutions, plan and implement activities and have the opportunity to make decisions in their communities and society as a whole. There are many ways in which young people can participate in decision-making on issues that are important to them and to the whole community. The most common forms of youth participation observed in contemporary European societies are the following[6]

• Volunteer work;
• Participation in various forms of non-formal education;
• Peer education - involving young people in the education of their peers;
• Youth councils, parliaments, forums and other structures - a traditional way of participating in the decision-making process within international, national, regional or local authorities, schools, clubs, non-governmental organizations, etc.;
• Co-management systems that exist in some institutions (for example, in the Directorate for Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe), where decisions are made together on an equal basis with representatives of young people and representatives of the authorities;
• Consultation - used in the decision-making process in order to express concerns and needs and make suggestions.

Several legal solutions generally define the position of young people in our society, both at the local and national level, as well as within educational institutions.

Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies[7], adopted in 2020, is the first legal solution that guarantees youth participation and prescribes and recognizes the forms of youth association and organization. This law regulates both local and national matters related to youth participation, thereby opening up obligations to support youth participation both at municipalities and at national institutions (Agency for Youth and Sports). This is the first law that defines youth participation in North Macedonia and guarantees the participation of young people through their representative bodies in the processes of creating policies and making decisions that affect them. The planned youth centers and youth officers are means of constant contact of young people with the institutions. The law foresees the adoption of local strategies for youth and a national strategy for youth with a duration of five years, as the most important

[6]"Have your say!" - Manual on the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life Council of Europe (2008), p.21

[7] https://www.pravdiko.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Zakon-za-mladinsko-uchestvo-i-mladinski-politiki-16-01-2020.pdf

documents for the development of the activities for youth that are planned and implemented by the institutions.[8]

In **the Law on Higher Education**[9] adopted in 2018, student participation in the management of universities is foreseen and guaranteed. This legal solution is extensive and regulates the matter in higher education, but the most significant in this context is the guarantee of independent student assemblies that democratically convey the views and needs of students to the highest level within the universities. Despite the open question by civil society organizations and student representative bodies, the existing **Law on Secondary Education**[10] still lacks regulation and guarantee of student organization and participation in decision-making processes in schools.

It is almost impossible to think about civil society without thinking about active individuals and groups acting on a voluntary basis. Volunteering today presupposes organized activities that have three characteristics: voluntariness, the well-being of another person or general well-being, and the free provision of a service or activity.[11] Volunteering in our country is defined in **the Law on Volunteering.**[12] In it, volunteering is defined as the voluntary provision of personal services, knowledge and skills and/or performance of other activities for the benefit of other persons, authorities, organizations and other institutions, without compensation.

Having in mind the picture of the current legal solutions and proposals, the need for opportunities for real democratic youth involvement, the need to create functional youth services, youth centers and opportunities for effective communication with educational and local institutions is clear.

The position of this category of citizens can be improved only through constant monitoring and documentation of the situation, preparation of recommendations and representation before the institutions with specific requests for young people. In addition, through these approaches, work can be done to reduce the differences in the opportunities that young people have in different environments, especially by improving the opportunities of young people in rural areas and smaller towns.

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[8]More in: Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, 2020 https://www.pravdiko. mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Zakon-za-mladinsko-uchestvo-i-mladinski-politi-ki-16-01 -2020.pdf

[9]More in: Law on Higher Education https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Zakon%20 za%20visokoto%20obrazovanie%20NOV.pdf

[10] http://www.sonk.org.mk/documents/Zakon%20za%20sredno%20obrazovanie.pdf

[11] https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/UNV%20Issue%20Brief%20-%20Basic%20Ser vices%20and%20Volunteerism.pdf

[12]More in: Law on Volunteering, July 2007, Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova No. 85/2007 https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/zakoni/precisten_tekst_volonterst-vo.pdf

2. Methodological approach

2.1. Methodological framework

2.1.1. Objectives of the research

The main goal of this study is to assess the needs, challenges and risks of young people from all planning regions, by understanding the perceptions of the quality of life of the young people included in the research sample, in order to identify the basic initial values of the indicators that will be used to track project progress.

At the same time, the research was done in relation to the respondents' perceptions of: quality of life, education, youth policy, youth participation and youth safety.

2.1.2. Subject of the analysis

The subject of the analysis is to determine the respondents' perception of the needs, challenges and risks of young people aged 15 to 29 in different environments in all regions of our country.

2.1.3. Research methodology

This research is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative research procedures, with the analysis of primary and secondary data. More specifically, the following research techniques were used to collect the data:

- Literature review;
- Focus groups
- Online survey for youth aged 15 – 29 years, on a convenient, national sample, through the SurveyMonkey platform.
- Online survey for civil society organizations through the SurveyMonkey platform.

The sampling design in this research is performed according to the subject of the research and the availability of data for selecting the sample. The target population in this research are young people aged 15 to 29 and civil society organizations that work for and with young people.

The youth survey was conducted on a sample of 1050 respondents, in the period July - August 2021. For this purpose, a bilingual version (in Macedonian and Albanian) of the questionnaire was created. The questionnaire intended for civil society organizations was completed by 61 organizations.

The data were analyzed on a quantitative and qualitative level, using the following research methods:

• Exploratory method;
• Descriptive method;
• Comparative method;
• Explanatory method.

The quantitative data obtained from the survey research are analyzed at the univariate, bivariate and multivariate level, using appropriate statistical procedures in SPSS, which are textually interpreted and visually presented through pictures, tables, graphs and diagrams. Qualitative data from the conducted focus groups are narratively analyzed and incorporated into the thematic analysis of areas.

One of the limitations of the survey is that it was conducted via an online format during a pandemic, making it impossible to fully target youth according to a predefined sample.

The online survey covered 1050 respondents, which represents a large enough sample to determine the perceptions of the quality of life among young people in the Republic of North Macedonia, and the sample is representative enough to be able to generalize for all young people in the republic. The research was conducted on the entire territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, in all 8 statistical regions.

However, not all 1050 respondents answered all the questions. The collected data are presented through descriptive statistics, tables and images, which aim to clearly describe all results, conclusions and proposals. In addition, according to the call for research, a desktop analysis of the national legislation and previous research on this topic was done.
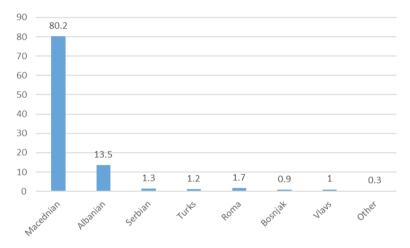
Within the qualitative part, eight focus groups were conducted from all planning regions, including 69 young people:

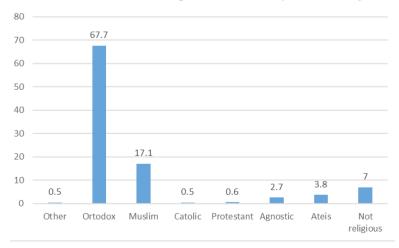| Planning region	Number of participants
Vardar Planning Region	4
Skopje Planning Region	7
Northeast Planning Region	12
Polog Planning Region	10
Pelagonija Planning Region	11
Southeast Planning Region	9
Eastern Planning Region	8
Southwest Planning Region	8

2.1.4. Research sample

For the needs of the analysis, 1050 questionnaires were filled out by people aged 15 to 29 years. 244 (23.2%) of the persons are male, 689 (65.5%) are female, 0.2% stated that they feel differently, and 11% prefer not to answer this question.

The respondents are divided into 3 age groups, namely between the ages of 15 and 19 (N=391), between the ages of 20 and 24 (N=351) and between the ages of 25 and 29 (N=185). The rest (11.7%) respondents did not answer this question. In terms of nationality, we can note that the largest percentage of the sample consists of representatives of Macedonian nationality (80.2%)

When it comes to religious affiliation, 67.7% of respondents are Orthodox, 17.1% are Muslim, and 7.0%% point out that they are not religious.
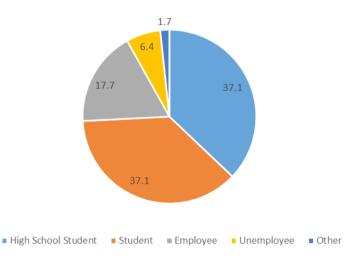
Respondents also had the opportunity to highlight whether they have a disability or not, with 38 respondents (4.1%) stating that they have a disability, mostly poor eyesight (15 people) and attention deficit (9 people).

	Frequency	Percentage
Acquired / traumatic brain injuries	3	0 .3
Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder	9	0 .9
Asperger's Spectrum / Autism	2	0 .2
Blindness / low vision	15	1.4
Deafness / Hard of hearing	4	0 .4
Cognitive or learning disability	1	0 .1
Chronic disease / medical condition	5	0 .5
Mental health problems / psychological condition	6	0 .6
Physical disability / mobility condition affecting walking	3	0 .3
Physical disability / mobility condition that does not affect walking	3	0 .3
Speech / communication disorder	9	0 .9

Regarding the place of residence, we can note that 81.3% of respondents live in an urban area, 16.6% in a rural area.

Within our sample, most of the respondents, i.e. 1/3 (37.1%) are students and high school students.

3. Results and conclusions

The quality of life and the perception of young people about the future in our country is not at an enviable level and young people think that wages are low and the price of products is rising, and this makes it difficult for them to have the standard of living they desire. Youth in quality of life mean dignified employment, quality education, quality social life. They respect and love the local environment, but the choices are limited. Regarding the standard of living, young people share the opinion that our standard is low, but on the other hand, there is a little motivation among young people to raise it, and leaving the country for going to the EU is usually chosen as the easiest solution. What is important is that young people are aware that they are the ones who should "design" their future.

The free time of young people is reduced to visiting cafes and watching TV, which is not even remotely enough for a good quality of life. Although the quality of life is largely associated with material conditions such as unemployment, inadequate or underpaid work and poor working conditions, the social atmosphere of political and economic uncertainty plays a significant role, as does the perception of a poor educational system and the existence of discrimination.

Young people think that the **educational system** is not good, the assessment is unrealistic, and in addition, young people feel the pressure of the trend "that everyone should study". The quality of studies has declined due to the increased number of faculties, and diplomas are worth less. The practice is not systematized, it is more common in secondary vocational schools, but even there it often boils down to the student's personal involvement. In addition, the companies that receive the interns do not have a serious attitude towards them. The data on the presence of discrimination in education on several grounds is alarming: ethnic, gender, place of residence, as well as among marginalized groups (LGBT population, Roma and youth with disabilities).

Digitalization of education is positively received, due to the large number of advantages, especially in terms of easy access to more educational resources, but the problem is that all students do not have equal opportunities for teaching. Young people believe that the reforms and digitization of education is a process that needs more extensive discussion and debate in order to find the most appropriate solutions. According to young people, students and parents are not involved and consulted in the educational process.

Young people believe that there is a space for improving the quality of education at the national level, although the question arises as to what are the authorities of the institutions in the direction of improving the quality of education. According to them, although there is an improvement in the curricula compared to the past, it is still necessary to work on programs that will offer staff competitive in the labor market, hiring competent teaching staff and investing in better technical equipment of schools.

After completing secondary education, the choice of employment is very small. Most often, the chance for success is not sought in the place where young people come from and live, but in Skopje. The fact that all advertisements require a person with work experience is especially demotivating for young people. This is unrealistic for all those who have just graduated and are looking for a job. Unfortunately, in smaller municipalities, employment is realized mainly in public institutions, while the private sector does not have the power to absorb young staff. There are no large companies that can offer quality work and adequate work status to young people, which is why they believe that benefits and support from the state should be increased. A particular problem is that highly educated personnel cannot find suitable jobs, especially in the field of electrical, metallurgical, technological and IT professions for which there are no suitable industrial and corporate capacities in local communities.

The situation in the field of **youth policy and youth participation** in decision-making processes does not differ much from what was previously ascertained both in other local and national surveys. Young people are not satisfied with the quality of existing measures and policies for young people. In addition to that, very few young people are familiar with the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies as well as the National Youth Strategy 2016-2025. Young people are also not informed if there is a local youth strategy in their municipality.

Namely, young people do not have much experience of being consulted in decision-making processes both by the local self-government and by other local institutions. In some of the municipalities there are certain informal mechanisms through which youth participation in decision-making could be ensured, but it is necessary to strengthen and develop these mechanisms. The interest of young people is a key factor, and the best and closest way for such participation and inclusion of young people in social decision-making are local youth councils through which young people can lobby for their interests. What is most important is that young people have a generally positive attitude towards youth activism, although currently local youth councils, or ad-hoc consultative processes during the drafting of strategic documents, generally do not reach the majority of young people. In addition, the majority of young people have not heard of local youth councils as a model of participation. As a confirmation of the lack of effectiveness of the existing mechanisms for participation, CSOs stated that they do not have significant cooperation with the local youth councils as well as with the municipality.

Young people believe that the best way and motivation to get involved in decision-making at the local level is through civil society organizations, which is an excellent opportunity for involvement considering that the majority of civil society organizations included in this research work on the participation of young people in public life. A large part of civil society organizations that work with young people operates based on functional policies and practices. In general, the civil society sector has capacities for representation at the local and national level, but despite this, the CSOs are still not satisfied with the level and

opportunities for involvement by the state in policy-making processes. A very small proportion of organizations were more substantially involved in certain processes in the last 12 months.

On the other hand, a small percentage of young people lobby and participate in other ways politically by running for councilors or being sympathizers of a certain political party and defending its ideology. Regarding the place of residence, it can be seen that young people from larger municipalities have more positive general attitude towards involvement in the community through volunteering, recognizing enthusiasm and free time as important factors for activism. On the other hand, NGOs have the desire to involve young volunteers but face difficulties in terms of retaining volunteers through a systematic approach that will ensure quality management of volunteers on a regular basis. Young people believe that although they formally have the right to participate, in reality they do not enjoy that right "they live in a country where they live from election to election". In addition to that, civil society organizations also believe that young people do not trust that their votes are going to lead to positive changes.

Young people feel **unsafe** online. Cyber security greatly affects the young population. There is a great lack of knowledge among young people about how they can ensure protection on the Internet, they do not know where and how to leave personal data and other information that can be misused. Also, road infrastructure safety and street movement are a problem for people with disabilities, but also for young people in general. Despite the cases of violence, young people perceive their own environment as safe.

Young people are mostly **informed** through social networks, while very few are informed about information that would be false or incomplete. Young people should be more informed about these phenomena and use the information carefully. Unfortunately, the attitude of young people is that the policies of young people are very little represented in our media and that the media contribute very little to improve the current situation of young people.

4. Recommendations

The starting points for defining recommendations are the key findings from the conducted research. Therefore, the recommendations that can be seen below are classified according to the areas covered by the research and refer to the quality of life, education, youth policies and youth participation, security and media and information.
Each set of recommendations is directly related to the results, that is, the problems noted by young people and civil society organizations in this research.

1. Quality of life
- Creation of focused economic and social policies specifically aimed at

young people from less populated areas, young people living in poverty as well as young people with atypical development, i.e. persons with disabilities, in order to improve their standard of living.
- Introduction of educational programs for financial literacy of young people in the system of education and social support
- Integrating youth employment and youth entrepreneurship measures into local economic development strategies by municipalities

2. **Education**
- Improvement of technical equipment and resources for quality teaching and learning in secondary schools
- Integrating a systemic approach for the implementation of quality practice for students in secondary schools, which will enable adequate measurement of achievements
- Strengthening coordination between municipalities, secondary schools and the business community to improve opportunities for practical teaching, including sharing positive experiences from successful businessmen and managers
- Strengthening the capacities of civil society organizations to enable non-formal education, with a focus on less developed regions
- Introducing content about the concept of youth work in educational content
- To strengthen measures to ensure equal access to educational resources for all students, especially for marginalized groups and students from rural areas
- Introducing sustainable mental health programs in secondary schools
- To increase the content in non-formal education about the importance of volunteering in the community

3. Youth policies and youth participation
- Continuous strengthening of young people's knowledge about the benefits of participation in decision-making and policy-making processes
- Introducing digital tools for participation that will ensure greater accessibility and freedom for young people to express their opinion
- Strengthening the role of civil society organizations in the promotion of the Law on youth participation and youth policies among young people, but also monitoring its application with a focus on the availability of appropriate budget funds for youth programs in accordance with the law
- Promotion of local youth councils provided for in the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies in order to familiarize young people with their role in the direction of greater participation of young people in local self-government units
- Strengthening the capacities of civil society organizations for volunteer management in accordance with positive legislation and international

practices in the direction of encouraging volunteer activities among young people
- Strengthening of measures to promote the benefits of youth work by institutions and the civil sector in the direction of systemic recognition and incorporation into the educational system
- Increasing the promotion activities of existing youth organizations at the local level for their activities, mission and activities among young people in primary and secondary schools, which will bring youth work closer to young people.
- Continuous strengthening of the capacities of civil society organizations to effectively represent the needs of their target groups, with a focus on the introduction of practical and applicable organizational policies
- Introduction of practices by the institutions for more substantial involvement of civil society organizations in processes of creating legal acts and policies related to youth, with a focus on civil society organizations from less developed regions

4. Security
- Strengthening the capacities of civil society organizations for the development and application of youth violence prevention programs, with a focus on students in secondary schools
- Creating resources for prevention and dealing with violence among young people in educational institutions
- Developing innovative tools that will provide a platform for reporting violence, as well as providing professional support

5. Media and information
- Strengthening media literacy among young people, with a focus on recognizing fake news
- Improving access to quality information among rural youth
- Raising awareness among young people about the impact of social media in terms of recognizing relevant and accurate information

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