



COMPARATIVE STUDY

YOUTH TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL IN THE EU INTEGRATION
PROCESSES
AND
POST-COVID-19 DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



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TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction	6
Research Methodology	7
Key Findings	8
Research Findings	9
Western Balkans Youth - Policy and Participation Mechanisms	9
Western Balkans Youth Core Values	10
Western Balkans Youth and the EU	11
Youth Participation Mechanisms in the Western Balkans	11
Deeper Dive into the WB Youth Participation in the Decision-Making	17
Understanding of (Youth) Participation	17
Motivation – What Fuels Youth Participation?	18
Youth Participation - Tools and Forms, and Institutions	20

COVID-19 Crisis vs. Youth Participation	24
Western Balkans Youth and the EU -	
Shared Values and Values Shared Less	27
Conclusion and Recommendations	29
ANENEX I – Screener Questionnaire	31
ANENEX II – Interview Guide	33
ANENEX III – References	36



INTRODUCTION

I would like for young people in the Western Balkans to be more connected, to exchange experiences and knowledge more. That is very important because young people in the Western Balkans, unfortunately, do not know enough about each other. The tragic '90s took us apart. We have a lot of common concerns and problems that we can solve together or at least help make the positive change happen.

A respondent from Serbia

There is so much going on in the Western Balkans, and we wish that many things have never happened. History, beauty, struggles, (competing) identities, everlasting narratives, unresolved issues, and deep pulsing traumas – all bundled in one region. History is now, it is happening in front of us, we are reliving it and making it as we speak. We are trying to understand our present, but we are living in the past. We are constantly looking behind us, we cannot get rid of our tails, dragging behind us and blocking the doors of the past we want to shut. We cannot finish things up, close that door and move on. Move on where? Our path, joint, seems to be set - we are moving towards Europe, although we are in Europe. Competition between the two Europes in our mindset is yet another paradox. I was flying once from Belgrade (Serbia) to Brussels (Belgium) via Zurich (Switzerland). *Why are you coming to Europe?* The customs officer at the Zurich Airport asked me. *I have never left it?! I said, a bit puzzled. One of the respondents noted when comparing the level of effort an average young person in Albania has to invest in order to accomplish even the smallest thing with the level of effort of an average young man in the EU: There is that English word "struggling" which captures all the feelings of Albanian youth; youth which is limited with the fact that it is in Europe, but out of Europe.*

Six Western Balkans (WB6) societies – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo^{1*}, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are on their way to the European Union. Democratization of the Western Balkans is the path and a goal by itself. It has been a long process, and it is going to last for quite some time. Eventually, once the struggle for democracy sees its outcomes, our region will be much different than it is now. It will be led by some other people, more likely better than us – today's youth. If you agree with me on the last sentence, then why not try giving up at least some of that power now, so that the youth of today can start leading before tomorrow comes!

This research study tries to identify what are the transformational potentials of WB6 youth in the EU integration processes and where do these potentials reside, particularly in the light of the COVID-19 crisis. More precisely, the study wants to investigate and analyze the key drivers and motivation for youth participation in decision-making processes, and the relationship between that motivation and the perspectives in relation to the EU and its core values. The study also attempts to give indications of what makes the youth adhere to those values in 2020, having in mind political and social turbulent dynamics in the region, as well as what motivates them to move forward and stay actively involved in their societies' and the region's future. The study particularly examines how COVID-19 crisis affects their motivation and perceptions, as well as how youth perceives the effects of the pandemic on their further involvement in the policy designs and the EU integration processes. It analyses what tools and approaches, when it comes to youth participation, work best, and which ones are expected to be more efficient and fruitful in the future.

This research study was prepared within a wider "Regional Youth Compact for Europe" project, supported by the European Union, which aims to empower CSOs, particularly youth organizations in the WB and Turkey for a more effective participation in policy - making and monitoring process of the EU integrations. Carrying out this study was a demanding task – it was conducted mostly during the summer of 2020, with COVID-19 pandemic that very much present at the time, and affecting most of the aspects of the process. Furthermore, the research work coincided with election campaigns and elections taking place in Serbia, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. Therefore, a full support and co-operation with CRTA team, especially Tamara Branković, Nikola Paunović and Igor Stojilović were critical, as well as the proficiency and dedication of the regional experts: Lejla Kusturica, Kreshnik Loka, Ardita Metaj Dika, Valentina Atanasovska and Aleksandra Gligorović. A special thanks goes to Nataša Konstantinović for her tremendous effort and support to the desk review.

¹ **This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo* declaration of independence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To conduct the research, the following data collection methods and analysis were used:

1. *Focus group interviews* (FG), a method of qualitative research, which allowed for deeper understanding of behavior, attitudes, motives, and practices. It also allowed for the collection of large amounts of information in a relatively short period of time. A total of 12 FGs were conducted, 2 in each of the targeted societies, during June and July 2020. The target group was the regional youth, from 18 to 30 years old, with dominantly neutral to positive perception of the EU and with the experience of and/or knowledge about the participation in the decision making, policy design and/or monitoring processes on local or national level. This FG composition allowed for deeper insights and knowledge of youth participation from those who know how the participation process looks like, what are its (wanted and unwanted) outcomes, and, as the study has showed, how closely connected it is with activism. Following the similar approach, involving only those with more positive perception of the EU enabled better understanding of sources and causes of such perception, while at the same time provided space, for FG participants to, during FGs discussions, dig deeper into their own motivation, diminishing the risk of polarizing debates of pro vs. against EU narratives. This does not mean that such debates are unwanted – outsiders' perspectives are highly appreciated as they usually provide objective insights and can challenge the thinking and experience of the opposite group - they would do more harm than good having in mind the research's scope and objectives.

FGs consisted of 6 to 8 participants (6.3 on average), which allowed for active contribution of each participant and for the lively group dynamic. All FGs were conducted electronically, using Zoom platform. They were recorded (audio and video), and transcribed (and translated where needed). FGs lasted approximately for 120 minutes, which was more than anticipated. Average time was longer than planned to some extent because of the technical issues, but mostly because of demanding interview guide and great motivation that majority of participants expressed during the discussion. Each FG was facilitated by an experienced moderator, in a local language, using the same interview guide. The guide consisted of two levels of questions: context or introductory questions, which allowed to open up a topic, and deeper open-ended questions which allowed for more lively discussion and exchange in the group, as well as more details and clarifications.

FG participants were selected using a short online screening questionnaire which consisted of 17 questions in total, including key demographics, perspective of EU values, level of experience, knowledge in participation in the decision-making, policy design and monitoring processes (national/ local) and contact information. Based on the responses, participants were selected through a quasi-random procedure.

2. *Desk research* work was conducted during July-September 2020. This research consisted of identification, collection, and analysis of existing national and local institutional mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making processes, policy development and monitoring across the region. The analysis focused on the official regulation(s) of participation mechanisms. The data was collected through the review of the official legislation, previous analysis and research conducted by national and local youth CSOs, international organizations, umbrella organizations, research institutes and other institutions involved and interested in the issue. The objective of the desk research was to identify existing national regulations and understand their scope and reach, while not getting too deep into policy analysis. Also, desk research was used to present a broader picture through the review of previous mostly quantitative analysis, of the level of youth participation across the region and the key values WB youth shares. The desk research thus provides a context in which the qualitative analysis of the FG discussions should be interpreted, particularly taking into consideration that participants were selected according to fixed criteria, meaning that their opinions and attitudes should be considered typical for that segment only (dominantly pro-EU, and at least some experience and/or knowledge about the youth participation).

Although it was already mentioned in the previous chapter, one more elaborate explanation must be provided regarding methodology: preparations, selection of FG participants, FG interviews and the analysis were taking place during the COVID 19 pandemic. This affected the study-making process, both technically and thematically. The focus group meetings were organized at the time when the first wave of COVID-19 has just passed and the second one was on its way, with the local outbreaks happening across the region and with an anticipation that the next wave would happen in autumn. This situation has significantly affected the respondents' assessment of their own reactions and the local and national governments' response, as well as their perception of youth reaction to this unprecedented situation. It was difficult for participants to give any predictions about how the COVID-19 experience would affect the future of youth participation because nobody knew at the time how exactly the pandemic would further develop, not to mention how long it would last. Furthermore, analyzing an ongoing global phenomenon having a significant impact on the local contexts was even more demanding, whilst most importantly – there has been nothing similar in neither personal nor collective memory of present generations, especially youth.



KEY FINDINGS

Selected key findings should provide more understanding of the social and political context in which the WB youth resides, as well as the most important insights important for understanding the potentials and limitations of youth participation in the region.

1. Across the WB6, there is no one common perception among youth of either the EU in general or the EU accession process. The differences in perception range from more positive in Albania and Kosovo* to more negative in Serbia on the other end.
2. A strong migration drive is one of the most outstanding commonalities of entire WB region, and a large number of young people are thinking about leaving to other countries outside the region, primarily because of unsatisfying socio-economic conditions.
3. Regulatory framework for youth (participation) is not fully developed in all WB societies. However, where majority of laws and regulations are in place, there is an evident lack of an enabling environment, either because of inadequate or insufficient implementation, or because the existent legal framework is not encouraging youth participation.
4. General understanding of participation among interviewed youth activists includes a range of different perceptions: both as a formal and informal activity, done through formal or informal channels. Participation is also closely connected to activism itself, here defined as taking a public stand and engaging in an activity to tackle a publicly important issue.
5. The level of trust in public institutions is significantly low, while they are perceived as not serving their purpose or even more as corrupted. This mistrust comes hand-in-hand with a generally low trust in the political elites, although somewhat less in Kosovo* as compared with the rest of the region.
6. Low level of trust in the institutions and the elites makes informal participation tools and mechanisms more attractive. These mechanisms and tools have a more powerful democratic potential, bear more energy, and allow for more creativity, but sometimes are less efficient and less credible in the formal systems where decisions are made.
7. Internet communication and E-participation are perceived both as quick and inclusive tools on one hand, but there is a widely present awareness about its negative aspects among the FG participants on the other.
8. The COVID-19 crisis, as well as any other potential crisis, is seen as both an opportunity and a threat. In other words, in the Western Balkan context, the pandemic is perceived as something that can bring the best out of young people – solidarity, motivation and creativity, and the worst out of autocratic, populist regimes.
9. Most of the respondents expressed recognition of the core democratic values associated with the EU integration process, including human and minority rights, gender balance, equality, tolerance, inclusiveness and critical thinking (acquired through education).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

WESTERN BALKANS YOUTH - POLICY AND PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS

The six western Balkans societies aspiring to become EU member states are at different stages in applying EU norms and values and proving they are on a right track to joining the EU. Apart from their common, complicated past, these share similar stages of development when it comes to youth participation, as well as development of youth policies in general (although there are some evident differences that will be presented in the following chapters). While aspiring to the EU, the entire region is looking at different policy and institutional solutions of the EU, with varying success. The same goes for the youth policies – they have varying success in enabling and promoting youth participation in different ways. The EU has adopted a new EU Youth Strategy, (https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en) has established European Youth Parliament, and has several different bodies which monitor and evaluate the implementation of Youth Policy on the European level. Finally, the EU has a robust mechanism for financial support, within the EU as well as outside of it, which focuses on youth and is one of the most important aspects of sustainability of youth organizations.

Furthermore, there are some other similarities between the WB6, some of them are youth perceptions on the current situation in their respective societies. According to recent studies², WB6 young people (14-29. y.o.), rate employment and economic welfare as the most important socio-political values (apart from North Macedonia, in which human rights are rated more than previous two). This comes as no surprise, having in mind that unemployment rates of youth are high – 54% in Bosnia & Herzegovina, the highest youth unemployment rate in Europe in 2016, followed by Kosovo* and North Macedonia³. In relation to that, youth finds that the most important tasks of the national governments are focusing on the reduction of unemployment and economic growth and development⁴. Another common concern among youth is a fear and uncertainty when it comes to employment opportunities and whether they will be able to find a job after graduation from the university. Even if they develop skills to the best of their abilities, that alone does not guarantee a job⁵.

The level of political and civil engagement of youth seems to be unsatisfactory for reaching the desired democratic principles. Besides voting, most of the youth does not engage in any other form of participation. Some 69% of young people in Kosovo* and Albania and 63% in Montenegro have never volunteered⁶, whilst they are reluctant when it comes to holding a political position or being engaged in a political party⁷.

One of the common aspirations of young people across WB6 is a high percentage of those who want to emigrate. Almost half of Albanian youth wants to leave to another country, while the lowest number is in Montenegro, with one fourth of the young population aspiring to leave⁸. When asked about the reasons for migration, most of the respondents have stated the same reason: bad economy⁹.

2 Mirna Jusić, Miran Lavrič and Smiljka Tomanović. (2019). Youth study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. p.46. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

3 Ibid. p. 25

4 Ibid. p. 46

5 Radoman, Marija. (2019). Vrednosne orijentacije srednjoškolaca u Srbiji-istraživanje 2019. Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji. Hesinške sveske br. 38.

6 Mirna Jusić, Miran Lavrič and Smiljka Tomanović. (2019). Youth study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. p.68. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

7 Ibid. p. 70

8 Ibid. p. 74

9 Ibid. p. 76

WESTERN BALKANS YOUTH - CORE VALUES

There are three main concerns identified by the youth in the Western Balkans as alarming ones: unemployment, failed expectations, and migration. According to a survey conducted in Serbia, more than 50% of young people live with their parents and 38% of them do not have any income¹⁰. Various research show that “there is a connection between socio-economic conditions and values that young people have”¹¹. For example, in Albania, 87% of youth believes that their personal lives in general, or their professional careers will develop further and get better. But when it comes to the future of Albanian society as a whole, there are 55% of youth that believes the situation will get better, while 23% believe it won't change and 15% that the situation will only get worse¹². As a result, the youth perceives migration as the only way to change their living conditions for the better. There are 60% of Albanian youth with strong or moderate desire to leave their country and move abroad¹³. The main reason is the general economic situation. Seeking better education is also one of the reasons for migration. For example, out of 92% of the youth from Kosovo* who intend to obtain university degrees, 60% of them would prefer to get it somewhere else rather than Kosovo*¹⁴. Poor living conditions combined with disappointment with the future and the system of education, and on top of that, a feeling of low self-representation in the institutions and politics in general (64% of young people in Kosovo*, for example¹⁵) depicts a very depressive situation in which youth of the WB6 are in.

Economy directly influences political orientation of youth, who desire to have strong state that would ensure equality among people¹⁶. WB6 youth are strong supporters of the welfare state, however they are not opposing free markets and show high consumerist values, and this “dualism” is a characteristic of “millennial socialism”¹⁷. According to the study conducted in Kosovo* one fourth of the Kosovo* Albanian youth did not know how to position themselves on the left/right political orientation scale, while most of them (36%) lean towards the center. As for Kosovo* Serbs, almost one third did not know how to position themselves on the scale, 65% are neutral or lean towards the center¹⁸. There is a similar situation in North Macedonia, where almost 50% did not know how to position themselves. Out of those who were able to distinguish left- and right-wing political orientations, 37% chose the left wing, 35% center and 28% the right wing¹⁹. Compared to findings from the 2013, left wing orientation increased by 14%, while right wing preference decreased by 11%²⁰.

An interesting finding is that despite of high mistrust in the political institutions and lack of belief that they can change anything by their engagement in politics, there is still high percentage of youth who vote in the elections. For instance, in Kosovo* 82% of youth voted in the last elections.

As for general values in life, the youth in Serbia appreciates most the ones connected to the relations with their families, while the appreciation of values related to civic engagement and politics is the lowest²¹. Similar to Serbia, the youth of Albania stated that family values are the most important to them, as well as being faithful to friends, partners and employers and finally having a successful career²². Values orientation of Montenegro youth shows that a significant number of young people are inclined to authoritarian and conservative patterns²³. Apart from these differences, youth in Kosovo* is divided when it comes to values: while young Kosovo* Albanians stated that they regard altruism, tolerance and fairness as the most important values, young Kosovo* Serbs stated that personal dignity and social recognition are the most important values²⁴.

- 10 Radoman, Marija. (2019). Vrednosne orijentacije srednjoškolaca u Srbiji-istraživanje 2019. Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji. p. 18-20. Hesinške sveske br. 38.
- 11 Ibid. p. 18
- 12 Kamberi, Geron & Çela, Alba. (2019). Youth Study Albania 2018/2019. p. 16. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- 13 Ibid. p. 35
- 14 Rrumbullaku, Olton. (2019). Youth study in Kosovo* 2018/2019. p. 7. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- 15 Rrumbullaku, Olton. (2019). Youth study in Kosovo* 2018/2019. p. 49. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
- 16 Mirna Jusić, Miran Lavrić and Smiljka Tomanović. (2019). Youth study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. p.47. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- 17 Ibid. p. 48
- 18 IDRA Team of authors. (2012). Kosovo* youth study. Forward looking grounded in tradition. p. 48. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
- 19 Topuzovska Latkovikj, Marija et al. (2019). Youth Study North Macedonia 2018/2019. p. 71. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- 20 Ibid., p. 71
- 21 Popadić, Dragan; Pavlović, Zoran & Mihailović Srećko. (2018). Mladi u Srbiji 2018/2019. p. 26 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
- 22 Kamberi, Geron & Çela, Alba. (2019). Youth Study Albania 2018/2019. p. 15. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
- 23 Westminster Foundation for democracy. (2019). Youth perception and attitudes towards politics in Montenegro. p. 48
- 24 Ibid. p. 21

WESTERN BALKANS YOUTH AND THE EU

The youth of Western Balkans societies in general have positive views on their societies becoming EU members, apart from Serbia. The level of support varies, but the main reason is the same across the EU: improvement of their standard of living.

According to the Balkan Barometer Survey, 59% of participants from WB6 responded that EU accession would have a positive impact on the economy of their societies. However, the differences in responses across the WB6 are significant. The highest trust that joining EU would have a positive effect on the economy is noticed among respondents in Albania with 87% and Kosovo* with 75% in favor of EU Accession (55% in Montenegro). In Serbia the trust that the economy would improve is the lowest – 26%. Moreover, 24% believe that it would actually have a negative effect on Serbia's economy²⁵. The most recent data show that 46% of youth in Serbia do not support joining the EU, and only 33% are in favor of Serbia becoming a member²⁶. When asked about what the EU means to them personally, the respondents prioritized economic prosperity in the first place, freedom to study and/or work in the EU, and finally the freedom to travel²⁷.

Among EU's strongest supporters are Albanians and Kosovo* Albanians (88%)²⁸. However, Kosovo* Serbs seem to be the most skeptical ones when it comes to the EU, 56% of the are opposing it²⁹. One of the respondents replying to the question why he does not support the EU stated: "People are against the EU integration since they supported bombardment of this area. They cannot be our friends. EU integration means taking away our national dignity"³⁰. The statistics are also showing that 69% of North Macedonia youth would vote in favor of joining the EU. However, the reason for that is not so much connected to the proclaimed values of the EU, but more of the pragmatic reasons, that there they will have material gains and general improvement of their economic situation³¹.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

This chapter focuses on state mechanisms that should allow for and encourage youth participation, as well as other ways youth can be involved in the decision-making processes. For analytical purposes, youth participation is grouped in three major categories:

1. Participation in state institutions
2. Participations through CSOs
3. Volunteering

Because of the general political and institutional similarities between WB6 societies, the approaches to youth participation, to its modalities and opportunities within respective policy making frameworks is similar. However, there are some differences in how the public policies are developed in terms of youth participation, and which mechanisms are recognized. This chapter will present the particular analysis of each WB society.

ALBANIA

Albania is the second youngest country in Europe, with almost 25%³² of the young people in the total population. Although 62% of Albanian youth have no interest in politics³³, there are mechanisms for youth participation, however these might not be sufficient.

Albanian youth are not interested in participating in politics through political parties – relevant survey shows that 87% of them have never been involved with a political party³⁴. Moreover, 58% of them do not even have trust in political parties. What is even more problematic is that more than half of young people in Albania do not trust the institutions such as the President, the Parliament and the Government³⁵,

25 Regional Cooperation Council. (2020). Balkan Barometer. Public opinion-analytical report. (p. 37-41). Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council
 26 Stojanović, Boban, Ivković, Aleksandar. (2020). Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji – 2020. godina. p. 156. Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije-KOMS.
 27 Ibid., p. 41
 28 Rrumbullaku, Olton. (2019). Youth study in Kosovo* 2018/2019. p. 54. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
 29 Ibid. p. 56
 30 Rrumbullaku, Olton. (2019). Youth study in Kosovo* 2018/2019. p. 54. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
 31 Vangeli, Anastas. (2019). Public Opinion and Popular Narratives Ahead of the EU Council in Fall 2019. China CEE institute.
 32 Filipi, Gjergj. (2015). Youth in Albania: Challenges in changing times. Republic of Albania. Institute of Statistic.
 33 Kamberi, Geron, Çela, Alba. (2019). Youth Study Albania 2018/2019. p. 63. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
 34 Ibid., p. 69
 35 Ibid., p. 68



which explains the low participation levels.

Albania has not yet adopted a law of youth and it has not defined legal age of youth; however, it is usually referred to people aged 15-29³⁶. The youth strategy adopted by the Albanian government, the *National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020*, is "the only legal act regulating the implementation of youth activities at the local and national level"³⁷. The creation and adoption of this strategy was participatory itself, as it reached 12.000 young people in the consultation phase³⁸. Also, it seems to possess the right focus –its first objective being *Youth promotion and participation in democratic processes/decision making*, and the second: *Youth employment promotion through effective labor market policy*³⁹. It surely does recognize participation as a necessity and a value, and unemployment as one of the key issues youth of Albania is facing.

To develop a better network of existing CSOs and an improved level of cooperation between them and the state, a National Council for Civil Society was established in 2015⁴⁰, which affects the work of youth organizations as well.

Youth organizations usually lack permanent staff and struggle with achieving financial viability. Their dependence on international donors does not contribute to their sustainability and diminishes the opportunity for young people to engage and participate in their activities⁴¹, while there is limited support for youth organizations coming from the state institutions/bodies. Although there are 174 organizations and informal groups in Albania, they are more connected to other organizations in the region, than on the national level, due to their competitiveness⁴². Also, data shows that more than 40% of Albanian youth have no trust in CSOs⁴³.

Also, it seems that volunteering is not very popular amongst Albanian youth. Before the start of transformation towards a liberal democracy, citizens were forced to do hard voluntary work (which was in fact forced labor) so a negative perception of volunteering remains⁴⁴. The Law on Volunteering has been adopted in 2016, with the aim to "...boost the civic engagement and participation of citizens in community development"⁴⁵.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Apathy among the youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina is clearly evident, similar as in the WB6 region. Youth believes (77% of them) that they have little or no influence over decision-making at the local level⁴⁶. Youth coming from the vulnerable groups believes to even larger extent that they do not have any influence over decision-making⁴⁷. Youth does not believe in political parties and politicians, moreover they believe that people joining political parties do it for their own interest⁴⁸.

Although there is no law on youth on the country level, there are 3 different laws on youth: each entity has one - the Law on Youth in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Law on Youth Organization in the Republic of Srpska, plus the Law on Youth in Brčko District⁴⁹. All 3 laws define youth as people who belong to the 15-30 age group. These laws allow youth to participate through informal groups, associations, and umbrella organizations. In fact, there are three youth umbrella organizations: Youth Council of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Youth Council of Republic of Srpska, and Youth Council of Brčko District⁵⁰.

Even though policies on youth exist, there is no Youth Strategy on a national level, and only the Republic of Srpska has developed its youth strategy⁵¹. The current 2016-2020 strategy emphasizes employability and active participation as the key priorities⁵². However, 72% of young people do not have trust in the institutions, which is in line with the evidently present apathy and low participation levels⁵³. Historically, volunteerism in Bosnia and Herzegovina has strong roots and it was rather common. According to the research conducted in 2017, 14% of young people volunteered in the previous year⁵⁴. However, there is no regulatory framework on a national level, while both the Republic of Srpska and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina have their own Laws on Volunteering⁵⁵.

36 Loka, Kreshnik. (2017). Contribution of non-programme countries to EU youth Wiki. Chapter I: Albania youth policy governance. p. 2. Council of Europe.

37 Ibid. p. 3

38 Ibid. p. 3

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid. p. 6.

41 Albania in the Berlin process. (2016). A Mapping and Comparative Assessment of Youth Organizations in the Western Balkans. An Insight to Youth Organizations and Youth Policy in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. p. 7.

42 Ibid. p. 8

43 Kamberi, Geron, Çela, Alba. (2019). Youth Study Albania 2018/2019. p. 68. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

44 Topalli, Irena. (2018). Contribution of non-programme countries to EU youth Wiki. Chapter II: Voluntary activities. p. 3. Council of Europe.

45 Ibid. p. 4

46 United Nations. (2016). Voices of Youth. Research into youth in BiH. Dijalog za budućnost. p. 67

47 Ibid. 67

48 Ibid. 67

49 Vijeće mladih Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine. Fakat je vakat za mlade- Vodič kroz Zakone i prava mladih u Bosni i Hercegovini. p. 1

50 Ibid. p. 5

51 Jasarevic, Jasmin. (2017). Contribution of non-programme countries to EU Youth Wiki. Chapter I. Bosnia and Harzegovina: Youth Policy Governance. p. 4.

52 Ibid. p. 4

53 Dušanić, Srđan. Lakić, Siniša. & Turjačanin, Vladimir. (2017). Građansko i političko učešće mladih- psihološki pristup.p. 94. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Banja Luka.

54 Jašarević, Jasmin & Jevdić, Jugoslav. (2018). Contribution of non-programme countries to EU Youth Wiki. Bosnia and Herzegovina Chapter II: Voluntary Activities. p. 3. Council of Europe.

55 Ibid., p. 4

The cited authors: Dusanić Srđan, Lakić Siniša and Turjačanin Vladimir found a strong correlation between the participation and trust in institutions, and suggest that the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina will have to change their communication strategy towards young people in order to make them feel needed by the political system and the society as a whole. Furthermore, they indicate that building trust in the institutions must start from the educational system since these are the first institutions youth encounters.

KOSOVO*

The population of Kosovo* is the youngest in Europe, with 55% of people under 30 years of age⁵⁶. This puts a lot of pressure on the Kosovo* Government to invest in creation and implementation of youth related policies and participation mechanisms. A year after declaration of independence, the Government of Kosovo* has adopted the *Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth*⁵⁷. The difference from any other youth law in the WB6 region is that the one in Kosovo* defines youth as those 15-24 years old,⁵⁸ leaving out the population of young people aged 24-29. The most important institutions defined by this law are Central Youth Action Council, Local Youth Action Council and Youth Centers⁵⁹.

In addition to the Law, Kosovo* has adopted a Youth Strategy 2019-2023, which as its first three objectives declares: 1. *Mobilization of youth for participation*, 2. *Providing skills and preparing youth for the labor market* and 3. *Healthy and safe environment*⁶⁰. The strategy perceives that, in order to achieve greater participation of youth, it has to focus on the capacity building of youth organizations and to financially support initiatives of youth activists⁶¹. In addition, municipalities are perceived as important actors, which should increase the engagement of youth. Although most of the municipalities have achieved progress in development of local youth policies, not all of them have a sufficient budget to implement them⁶². Even though these bodies are envisioned by the law, according to the survey a 25% of students have never heard of the Action Plan, and only 23% knew a Law on Youth exists⁶³. Although Kosovo* Youth Action Plan is in line with European standards, it seems that the youth have not recognized it as the document that meets their needs, but rather as the document controlled by the donors, as 28% of its budget is funded by the international community⁶⁴.

Even though there seems to be favorable regulation, the data show that 90% of youth aged 18-25 have never been members of any political entity, CSO, youth organization, or any other youth group⁶⁵. After the war for independence, there was a proliferation of CSOs in Kosovo*, due to the financial foreign assistance. Numerous CSOs, dependent on international donor funds, have vanished. There also seems to be a lack of solidarity between the youth organizations since they are competing for funds⁶⁶. According to some previously collected data, there is around 90 active youth organizations in Kosovo*, with a very few members⁶⁷. Also, it seems that civic activism is unpopular among Kosovo's youth, with only 13% that have volunteered in a civil society activity. And there is a difference between the Serbian and Albanian youth in Kosovo*, with more activists on the Serbian side, with 30% of them which have volunteered⁶⁸.

MONTENEGRO

Recent survey shows that the rates of youth participation or even interest in politics in Montenegro are not high. According to the survey results, 31% of youth never follow political affairs, while 49% follow with limited attention: there is a high percentage (80%) of youth who are not really interested in politics⁶⁹. More than 75% of youth have not been a member of any political party. Also, more than 70% see no difference between the political parties or believe that differences are minor⁷⁰. Also, only 24% of youth would like for Montenegro to have a democratic leader, while the most popular type of leader is populist (34%), followed by paternalistic (21%) and authoritarian type (21%)⁷¹.

The government of Montenegro has adopted the Law on Youth relatively late – in 2019. The youth group includes population aged 15-30 years old⁷². According to IPSOS research, there is 21% (132.702) of young people aged 15-29. Some of the key findings of that research is that citizens believe that young people have been manipulated by the government and that their participation is just declarative and does not change anything substantially⁷³. The law defines the Youth Council, a coordinating body in charge of Youth Services, which consist of

56 Rrumbullaku, Olton. (2019). Youth study in Kosovo* 2018/2019. p. 4. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
 57 Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo*. (2009). Law No. 03/L-145 on empowerment and participation of youth.
 58 Ibid. p. 1
 59 Ibid.
 60 Republic of Kosovo*. Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. (2019). Strategy for youth 2019-2023.
 61 Ibid. 23-24
 62 Ibid. p. 9
 63 Feltes, Tilmann. (2013). Youth and Democracy: The Promotion of Youth Participation by the International Community in Kosovo*. p. 203. Security and Human Rights 24 (2013) 195–209. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
 64 Ibid. p. 203.
 65 International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2016). The role of Youth in political entities in Kosovo*. p. 3
 66 Feltes, Tilmann. (2013). Youth and Democracy: The Promotion of Youth Participation by the International Community in Kosovo*. p. 201. Security and Human Rights 24 (2013) 195–209. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
 67 Ibid. p. 201.
 68 Rrumbullaku, Olton. (2019). Youth study in Kosovo* 2018/2019. p. 61. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
 69 Westminster Foundation for Democracy. (2019). Youth perception and attitudes towards politics in Montenegro. p. 7
 70 Ibid., p. 13-14
 71 Ibid., p. 11
 72 ZAKON O MLADIMA. "Službeni list Crne Gore", br. 025/19 od 30.04.2019, 027/19 od 17.05.2019
 73 IPSOS. (2013). KAP istraživanje – istraživanje o znanju, stavovima i ponašanju građana Crne Gore u vezi sa zapošljavanjem i participacijom mladih. p. 34-35



Youth Clubs and Youth Centers⁷⁴. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Sports have developed the Youth Strategy 2017-2021, that focuses on six priorities: 1. *Economic and social security*, 2. *Quality of education*, 3. *Participation in decision making*, 4. *Health*, 5. *Culture* and 6. *Normative and institutional framework for implementation of youth policies*⁷⁵.

The Law on Volunteering has the same misunderstanding of the concept of volunteering as the one in North Macedonia (and Serbia), as it is seen as labour. It even forbids persons under the age of 15 to volunteer, not even if the school organizes an event⁷⁶. Since there is neither culture of volunteering nor real incentives coming from the state, it is no surprise that 72% of youth responded that they have not volunteered or been a member of an association or CSO⁷⁷.

It seems that it is hard to come up with an exact number of active youth organizations in Montenegro due to the lack of updated data in the national register. Also, there is no youth umbrella organization⁷⁸. However, there is a large number of active student organizations, which seems to be the most popular way of young people's channels for engagement⁷⁹.

NORTH MACEDONIA

The studies show that North Macedonia youth is not interested in politics. The latest study has shown that 17% of youth is interested in politics, which is significantly lower than in 50% recorded in 2013⁸⁰. There might be two explanations for that: First being that 80% of young people believe that the authorities do not care about them at all, or only partially care about them and their needs and problems. The second reason is their sense of inability to impact the way authorities make decisions⁸¹.

There is no national Youth Law in North Macedonia, although the Agency of Youth and Sports has initiated the process and drafted the law. However, due to the lack of participation of representatives of youth organizations they redraw the text for revision⁸². The main documents related to youth are the *National Youth Strategy 2016-2025* and *Action and Monitoring Plan*⁸³. These policy documents define youth as people aged 15-29; the percentage of that cohort in the total population in North Macedonia is 21%⁸⁴. The key priorities envisioned by the Youth Strategy are: 1. *Providing better economic standard for youth*, 2. *Creating conditions for protection of fundamental rights and freedoms*, 3. *Involvement of young people in monitoring and implementation of relevant policies* and 4. *Equal access to education*⁸⁵.

There are still no formal mechanisms for youth consultation, besides the public calls for participation in thematic working groups⁸⁶, meaning that participation in other policy processes, apart from directly related to youth issues is not guaranteed by any regulation, which results in low youth participation. Data also shows there is a low level of civic engagement of the youth, especially marginalized. It also shows that Macedonian youth, who are better educated and employed, are more engaged in comparison to the Albanian youth, which are less educated and more unemployed⁸⁷.

The Macedonian Law on Volunteering does contribute much to youth participation, since it defined volunteering as a form of labor, which is by many a misinterpreted concept⁸⁸. Gallup's Report (2016) placed North Macedonia among the ten lowest-ranked countries when it comes to the percentage of citizens volunteering, with only 7% of population⁸⁹.

Even though there is no official National Youth Umbrella Organization in North Macedonia, there are two organizations with great potential: The National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM) and The Coalition of Youth Organizations (SEGA)⁹⁰. NYCM gathers more than 40 youth organizations and covers wide variety of topics, from both rural and urban areas, as well as youth wings of political parties⁹¹. On the other hand, SEGA is primarily focused on lobbying for legislative changes and consists of 12 members and 14 associate organizations⁹². There are 103 youth organizations in North Macedonia and most of them are in Skopje region⁹³. Like elsewhere in the region, youth organizations are facing a lack of funding, which makes them work from one donor-funded project to another. This does not contribute to their long-term sustainability. As a consequence, there is not enough professional staff, as well as low membership level. However, on a positive side there has been more networking between youth organizations lately⁹⁴.

74 ZAKON O MLADIMA. "Službeni list Crne Gore", br. 025/19 od 30.04.2019, 027/19 od 17.05.2019

75 Ministarstvo prosvete Crne Gore & Ministarstvo sporta Crne Gore. (2016). Strategija za mlade 2017-2021.p. 8.

76 [http://www.strategijazamlade.me/download/Ishod%20C%20\(aktivacija%20mladih\).pdf](http://www.strategijazamlade.me/download/Ishod%20C%20(aktivacija%20mladih).pdf) . p. 36

77 Westminster Foundation for Democracy. (2019). Youth perception and attitudes towards politics in Montenegro. p. 20

78 Albania in the Berlin process. (2016). A Mapping and Comparative Assessment of Youth Organizations in the Western Balkans. An Insight to Youth Organizations and Youth Policy in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. p. 11-12

79 Ibid. 11-12.

80 Topuzovska Latkovikj, Marija et al. (2019). Youth Study North Macedonia 2018/2019. p. 68. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

81 Galevski, Martin. (2019). Socio-political participation of Youth in North Macedonia: Apathy, Optimism or Disappointment?. p. 9. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

82 European Commission. (2017). Youth Wiki national description. Youth policies in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. p. 8.

83 Ibid. p. 7.

84 Ibid. p. 7.

85 Agencija za mladi i sport. (2016). National Youth Strategy 2016-2025. p. 11.

86 Ibid. p. 65-66

87 Ibid. p. 38.

88 Ibid. p. 17.

89 Westminster Foundation for Democracy. (2019). Socio-political participation of Youth in North Macedonia: Apathy, Optimism or Disappointment? p. 27.

90 Ibid. p. 25

91 Ibid. p. 25

92 Ibid. p. 25

93 Ibid. p. 26

94 Ibid. p. 27

SERBIA

In Serbia there is only 18.4% of young people according to the 2011 census⁹⁵, which is the lowest number compared to others in the WB6. More than half of them do not have interest in politics at all⁹⁶. The level of trust in public institutions is also low – more than 50% do not trust the institution of President⁹⁷, while political parties are the least trusted institution, with 56% of youth not trusting them, while 38% feel indifferent⁹⁸.

Positive outcome of the last Parliament elections is that 28 people younger than 30 are going to be MPs⁹⁹, which is more than 10% of the parliament seats. However, being a member of a political party is not that popular among youth, as more than 86% are not members of any political party¹⁰⁰.

Serbia adopted the Law on Youth in 2011. The Youth Strategy 2015-2025 focuses on 11 priorities. The first two are youth participation and networking that should create better opportunities for advocacy of youth organizations¹⁰¹. The strategy also defines ways for young people to participate - by founding an association or a coalition. Besides that, there are local and provincial youth offices which should serve as a bridge between youth and youth organizations and the local and provincial authorities.

The National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS) is a national umbrella organization, established in 2011. It currently consists of 109 youth organizations. It is an advocacy platform which serves to improve the position of young people and acts as a link between young people, its member organizations and various decision-makers and providers of programs and services for young people (primarily the state and its institutions)¹⁰². Despite nine years of active presence and huge membership base, KOMS was legally recognized, by the state, as a national umbrella organization in August 2020. Together with KOMS, National Association of Youth Work Practitioners (NAPOR)¹⁰³ and the National Association of Youth Offices¹⁰⁴ are the three main pillars of the youth sector in Serbia¹⁰⁵.

Serbian Parliament enacted the Law on Volunteerism in 2010. Among other provisions, the Law envisages three categories of volunteer activities; requires that the host organization enters into a written agreement with the volunteer; requires that the host organization enters into the registry of volunteer organizations; requires that a volunteer organization submits an annual report on its activities to the Ministry; and prescribes severe penalties for the breach of any of the foregoing requirements. All these provisions are, similarly to volunteering related laws in the rest of the WB6, rendering volunteerism and have an adverse impact on the culture of volunteerism.



95 Potočnik, Dunja, Williamson Howard. (2015). Youth policy in Serbia. Conclusions of the Council of Europe International Review Team. Council of Europe, p. 11

96 Popadić, Dragan; Pavlović, Zoran & Mihailović Srećko. (2018). Mladi u Srbiji 2018/2019. p. 57. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

97 Ibid., p. 63

98 CeSID. (2019). Položaj i potrebe mladih u Republici Srbiji. p. 88. CeSID

99 Stojanović, Boban & Ivković, Aleksandar. (2020). Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji – 2020. godina. p. 101. Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije-KOMS.

100 Ibid., p. 117

101 Beogradska otvorena škola. Strateški okvir omladinske politike u Republici Srbiji- izazovi i perspective.

102 KOMS Official website: <http://koms.rs/en/organization/> Accessed on: 10th of September 2020.

103 NAPOR Official website: <http://www.napor.net/sajt/index.php/sr-yu/medjunarodni-projekti/about-napor> Accessed on: 10th of September 2020.

104 National Association of Youth Offices: <https://asocijacijakzm.org/> Accessed on: 10th of September 2020.

105 It is worth mentioning that in 2019, the City of Novi Sad, capital of Serbian Province of Vojvodina, was selected the European Youth Capital, where youth participation and policies are being developed and tested, which may further be implemented elsewhere in the region.

FROM CROSS-BORDER TO REGIONAL COOPERATION MECHANISMS

Thanks to the cross-border cooperation of all WB6 governments, an international organization dedicated to youth, Regional Youth Co-operation Office (RYCO) was established in 2016¹⁰⁶. RYCO is based in Tirana, with offices also in Belgrade, Podgorica, Pristina, Sarajevo and Skopje. The aim of RYCO is “to promote the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region through youth exchange programs”¹⁰⁷. All 6 governments have committed to fund the organization.

RYCO supports activities which are enabling cooperation between organizations across the region, mostly through youth mobility projects. This allows young people to travel and meet their peers from around region, thus breaking national and religious barriers. It is also worth mentioning that this is the first such mechanism formed through the co-management model, i.e. – it is led by both regional youth and governments representatives.

Apart from mechanisms, there are several projects and programs aimed at greater networking among regions youth, mostly focusing on youth employment:

Western Balkan Civil Society Organizations for Youth Employment Support (WEB4YES) (Belgrade Open School, Serbia)

Regional Youth Compact for Europe, particularly including the *Politeia Summer School* (Center for Democracy Foundation, Serbia)

My career from zero to hero - strengthening networks of Western Balkans CSOs to implement one-stop-shop youth employability model for future jobs of 4.0 digital revolution (Center for Youth Work, Montenegro)

Balkans Youth: Linking Education, Abilities and Partnership Potential in Regional Employment Practice (BY LEAP) (Junior Achievement, Serbia)

Western Balkans Youth Lab Project (Regional Cooperation Council)

WB&T for EmploYouth (Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation)



106 As a consequence of the Berlin process.

107 RYCO Official Website. https://www.rycowb.org/?page_id=152. Accessed on: 10th of September 2020.

DEEPER DIVE INTO THE WB YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE DECISION-MAKING

UNDERSTANDING OF (YOUTH) PARTICIPATION

As stated before, 12 focus groups in 6 WB countries gathered a total of 76 young people, aged 18 to 30. All of them have at least some experience with the decision-making processes, whether directly participating, or being familiar with it by organizing or monitoring such processes. It is important to note this because the majority of the WB6 youth, like mentioned in previous chapters, do not have these experiences. This is, indeed, one of the limitations of this research – it does provide insider perspective of the processes but understanding of those processes by most of the youth remains unknown. However, to understand how the system functions, it is inevitable to ask those having the knowledge and/or experiences of participation.

Although all FG participants have had at least some experience or knowledge of youth participation (majority had quite a lot) practiced on local and/or national level, and although existing laws and mechanisms are similar across the region, or use similar terminology, participation is not identically interpreted across the group, even though it seems that understanding comes from the same place. In one way, participation is perceived as direct involvement in the decision-making on the local or national level – for example, participation in a working group tasked to draft local Youth action plan: *The experience of writing that local plan (in 2009) was beautiful. Here is what happened - all the volunteer organizations that were active in the city of Pančevo at that time, all the presidents, leaders of those organizations gathered, and we registered one local umbrella organization...When we wrote that Local action plan, we presented ourselves as one organization, unified, and not as a million different people who were divided into a million different organizations. It really was a wonderful experience. Unfortunately, that girl who ran that whole thing (from the Local Youth Office) had left, some new people came, and it all started to decline (in terms of activities and motivation). So now let's get new young people to push through again!* In the other, participation is understood rather broadly and less formally. For example, even partaking in FG of this research was perceived as a type of participation (with the understanding and hope that their contribution to this research findings and recommendations could have some indirect impact), or even participating in ad-hoc or planned street actions. When asked to provide an example of youth participation, one responded has said: *...in my neighborhood some young people started a couple of years ago with a civic initiative to try to put local decision-makers' attention to the problem of the bad condition the main street was in. As the street was full of bumps and holes, they planted flowers in those holes and invited journalists to report on it. It got quite big publicity and decision-makers decided to pave that street.* This example brings to the attention the fact that activism, in any form – planned or spontaneous, political or humanitarian (one participant gave an example of street action organized by a local Red Cross office) is closely connected with participation. The concept of volunteerism as well cannot be easily unbundled from participation. There is a broader, wiser understanding of participation which takes into account that it can mean a direct contribution – like proposing an amendment – but also that it doesn't have to be part of some specific form and institutionalized – participation is also a street action, a rally or a social media campaign, because it allows for a voice to be heard.

Some good examples of how participation is understood came from many answers to a question: *How would you explain what participation is to a 10-year old child?* One of the most common ideas, across many FGs, was to use a child's play, as it is in their experience, to give an example of participation: *I would try with some banal example, like a game that children play, and I would explain it like this "You see, that game doesn't just have to be served to you. Let's see how you would design that game, what you would change or add, or do differently".*

This is a good example of how FG participants understand participation and what makes an activist – when we put forms and mechanisms aside (and we will come to these later), for an activist, or for (active) participation, *it is very important (for a young person) to be interested in issues that are socially sensitive, to be informed about current topics and to form a critical opinion. A young active person is the one which, when s/he receives an information, does not just take it for granted, but puts it through some of his/hers filters, and then forms his or her attitude, and then reacts based on that – as an active member of a society. I think that this interest is very important, and critical thinking and reflecting is also important in any activity of any young person.* This broad understanding of participation, and different shapes and forms it takes, are important to remember and take into account when analyzing other important aspects of it, like motivation or mechanisms, or how youth perceives the institutions (and society in general) when considering participation. Based on the answers and experiences shared by the participants, we may try to define activism, keeping in mind that it is very closely connected to participation – it is almost safe to say that every instance of activism is participation: activism is taking a public stand and engaging in an activity about a publicly important issue.

How (active) youth understands participation, and what are the boundaries within which it places participation and how it reflects on it, those questions lead us to the question of motivation and reasons behind why a young man or woman wants to participate in the first



place. Motivation can be analyzed solely from the psychological (internal) perspective, but that approach is beyond the scope of this study. As we got rich personal views and testimonies from the research participants, the analysis will focus on the circumstances and external processes and events which are adding to the motivation for participation, and how the youth interprets them and how it grades this context.

MOTIVATION – WHAT FUELS YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Obviously, there can be many reasons and motives for young people to want to get involved, but it seems that there are a few dominant ones within the group we have surveyed. One of them is the need to find the way to explore and learn, be curious and express their creativity. One way to do is, when there are no institutionalized (institutionalized in a broader sense, both formal or informal) opportunities, to find and create them individually or collectively. This short citation nicely sums it: *At least, especially if one lives in a small community, the motivation comes from the desire to get to know things. One doesn't have that many possibilities for that, especially when we take into account the political situation, and the political parties limiting opportunities and asking you to 'Become a political party member first' and similar. So, I really think, taking into consideration how much informed we are, that we can avoid this process (of joining political parties) and go on that path independently, to develop ourselves and succeed.*

It would be too much to say that being active and participating is contagious, but it seems that once young people get active, there is a drive to include peers, and show them cool things they can do once they get involved. It is also being done indirectly, just by being active and showcasing what participating is and what are the benefits for both the young person and the community: *In regards to that (motivation), and in relation to young active people (and I personally believe that there are a lot more of them than passive young people): because we work in various sectors and we (are in a position to) affect things, we are directing our friends and acquaintances (towards activism). We take one step further every day in including them. If nothing else, we are giving them the information that something like that exists. And those who will not get specifically involved will at least know about it, and maybe someone else they know will get into it.*

This leads us to a very important aspect of motivation – why young people get involved in the first place, and why they are staying active: it is the support of their community, peers, school, parents: *Essentially, it is necessary that someone or something in a community pushes young people (towards being active). Motivation coming from others is just as important as our own motivation. It is very important that someone directs us: "Let's do this, let's change that."* This exchange in B&H, between the FG moderator and some of the participants, further describes the importance of support. Even in a focus group consisting of people that probably have never met before and have different backgrounds (at least ethnic and religious), mutual understanding and sense of belonging yielded support, and motivated people further:

MODERATOR (M): *What motivates you? Did someone drag you into it, or did you look for a space, by yourself, to express some of your ideas on how something should look like in a society? And how do others (which are not active) see you?*

RESPONDENT 1 (R1): *There are always people who support you and those who do not, who think you are acting out or something. And it takes a lot of courage, whether we want to admit it or not.*

M: *What motivates you, what is your motive? Why don't you give up?*

R2: *Uh, what motivates me? To make my local community or whole Bosnia and Herzegovina a better place for myself and others. If I am 100% OK, I will do something useful and positive so that others around me are OK as well.*

R3: *I think we generally lack a lot of courage and a lot of guts to say 'Hey, it's our time now'. We miss that, the moment in which realize that voice saying: "WE will do it!". But I think there is a lot of potential. I am listening to these other young people and I really know we can do it; we need just a little bit.*

M: *Yes, R4, go please!*

R4: *I'm glad to hear something like this from R3. Simply put, I needed someone to shake me up and say: "Come here to see this, maybe that's exactly what you need". I am what I am today, so now I am shaking up others. Our communities are as they are, so I am trying, as much as possible, not to be surrounded by negative energy. I try to socialize with people who are like-minded and looking for ways to contribute to their community. No matter what, there will always be those who will try to slow you down or not let you advance, but it is important to me not to let such people get close to me.*

Motivation to act and try take part in the decision-making processes sometimes comes from the feeling of great dissatisfaction of how things are, in a society as a whole, or in the particular community or institution, especially when knowing that things can be better. And even when it comes from this negative feeling, there is again an understanding that the motivation to participate needs support and encouragement from others:

R1: Okay, what I have seen (that motivates others) is telling them who's to blame for them being in situation they are in. For example, when I am with young people, not as a part of some project, when we just talk about different issues, I hear they are worried about many things. They also tend to blame the national government for all their problems. They do not know that it is the local government, but also the mentality of the people, and this fragile system in which we live in is also to blame. Maybe it is not just the government's fault, but it's also our fault. I see a lot of people taking different responsibilities, without being able to do the job. For example, a lot of professors who just do not know how to do it. One can be a great expert but doesn't know how to convey to students this knowledge he has. This is a big problem. And youth also has family issues, financial issues, issues with professors, or they have personal issues sometimes, you know...

M: So, participation comes from rebellion?

R2: That's right, just like she said. Young people are very revolted and if they knew everything that is going on, who knows what they would do. Maybe we should tell them to complain, to advocate because it is their right. On the other hand, we also have the children of the people who are privileged, who are very well off and do not have those issues.

M: And they (those which are revolted) do not participate?

R2: Right, they do not.

M: And if they were active?

R2: Most of them are revolted and we have a good opportunity, maybe to inform them about the issues, about the things they can do. To tell them that they can make a change and how they can make it. Let's tell them that they cannot expect the change to happen if they don't take action. I tell them to advocate, to organize, to do protests and rallies or find some other way to express their dissatisfaction. I'm telling them how to do it, to choose a democratic way. And they sometimes do it, you know, sometimes they try, sometimes even ...For example, we have many initiatives that we share on Facebook, and some were good. I often suggest, "Okay, when you have something, some information, send it, raise your voice, send it to others as soon as you can." And they post it right away.

Of course, distrust and dissatisfaction do not always cause reaction. Even young people with less experience are disappointed when they see that the society they are living in is in status quo, and that can passivize them:

M: What motivates you, what makes you involved in consultations, for example, or to insist that the government gets involved in the consultations. For example, when the Law on Youth was getting adopted (North Macedonia), there were a lot of young people who were involved in the consultation process. What would motivate you to get involved?

R1: To have more competent people in institutions, in political parties... People would have more trust. I don't think most of the people trust them, and I don't think they will finish the process the way we would like it to finish. At the end...

M:...Others will decide?

R1: They will make decisions, inter-party, political decisions. They are representing different interests. I don't know... It's never certain, for example, when something comes from young people, an initiative or anything, some desire to change something, whether it will get implemented to the fullest extent.

M: Does that demotivate you?

R1: Yes, it does. I think that young people will not be heard properly, they will just be used. Not just young people, everyone, but in this case young people. In general, I do not have trust in the institutions, political parties and all decision-makers, the legislature.

M: Let me read to you what R2 have shared via chat: "I personally do not see myself here because only people who are "someone's" children and the like can prosper here. I will start with the socially vulnerable, because these young people cannot be provided with adequate jobs because there is much discrimination. Even if we would start an initiative to stop that discrimination, we would not be heard. Before the elections, political parties are promising them everything, just to get their vote, but nothing is ever done for them.

R3: I disagree. That is her opinion. I am, however committed to trying to change the standards in the politics, to raise them at least a bit. To make young people, those who believe that something needs to be improved, fight for it at least a bit. Because no one will give us anything, especially those people we consider incompetent. We criticize them, but in fact we are doing nothing, we are just sitting on the sidelines and wanting to escape from here. And then there will be nothing left of this country.

Once there is motivation, wherever it is coming from, young people are using different ways to act and take part in processes they find important and meaningful. With the wide understanding of participation presented previously, comes the variety of tools, and forms young people have at their disposal – some already existing, and some created to serve their needs.



YOUTH PARTICIPATION - TOOLS AND FORMS, AND INSTITUTIONS

Across the FG, there was a clear distinction between the formal and informal ways of how young people can get involved, and the pros and cons for using both. There is also clearly recognized need and understanding that tools and forms are better if they allow for creativity to be expressed, even if that does not provide more efficient or effective participation. This following quote wonderfully reminds us of the finding from the previous section, on how support is important to motivate participation, and provides insight and introduction to some different participation mechanisms: *I wanted to add something, since we are talking about specific mechanisms. When we (a youth organization) want to introduce young people to what participation is, how to participate... we focus on different workshops and peer education as a first step in empowering them to start an initiative. Because most often, after they go through that, once they are educators, trainers and so on, they establish their own initiatives and start believing in activism and advocacy, and later they sometimes join some organizations. Or they do not join, that depends, but they truly believe in what they are saying, they truly believe in some goal they share together. That's why I think that peer learning, as something I've been doing for quite a long time, is a good way to involve young people. ...On the other hand, I would like to mention a mechanism that is still developing in our country (Serbia), but I had the opportunity to work on its introduction, and that is "structured dialogue". I don't know if anyone has heard of that, it is a special mechanism for involving young people in the dialogue with decision makers. It is currently developing in Serbia and I hope that it will develop more in the coming period, because it is a good example of how participation mechanism works. By the way it is a mechanism that was transferred here from the EU. There are some mechanisms that are very well designed in the EU. In my opinion, and in the opinion of other professionals, these (mechanisms) really work, and I hope we will be able to transfer them here. This is quite challenging because the situation is completely different here and, in the EU, when we talk about the inclusion of young people.*

Respondents are aware of the existing formal mechanisms and their benefits, like the legitimacy, efficiency, or accountability they provide. Yet, they are also aware that sometimes these mechanisms do not function at all, or to extent they should function. Or that (young) people do not know that certain mechanisms exist in the first place, and how to use them:

R1: There are youth councils, and they should be functional, and through them young people could communicate with the public. I, same as her (the previous respondent), will certainly not be invited in a discussion (in regard to resolving some students' issue about exams), but a representative of a council could, in order to express our views. Young people can arrange things internally, but usually there is someone who does not agree or is not OK about what is being decided, or he wants to propose... It is always like that, and it always will be. And that is why I say representation is important, like a youth council - it will represent the views of young people, and it should be functional. I had a small project, it was in Krivogashani, in Prilep. Youth was involved in forming a youth council, through which they managed to act, that is, to propose different solutions publicly...

M: Well thank you. I think that R2 wanted to say something.

R2: I must agree with R1, because for a longtime when young people wanted to express their opinion, sometimes it was a bit ad hoc and without analysis of what effects that decision or request will produce. They only think about one particular issue, at one particular time. Like, for example, with those university exams. Everyone wanted to take the exam physically, and after a month and a half, when the exams started to be scheduled, they remembered that they have to travel, that they will not be able to be in the classroom if there are more than ten students, that they would have to take that exam maybe at night... So I think young people want to have a share in decision-making, but we(youth workers) need to help them a little bit, provide them with mechanisms and tell them how to be represented or to advocate, so they do not lose their legitimacy...

And when it comes to mechanisms, there are many mechanisms. We can start with the local youth councils that R1 talked about; then in every municipality there should be a local regulation on youth and the municipality should support them; then the National Youth Council - where all youth organizations should be represented; local organizations and university assemblies...

So those participation mechanisms, and us as representatives and bearers of participation mechanisms, need to be more known among young people, so that young people can come to us, and then we can represent their opinions. And if any of the young people... does not want to participate through us, there is certainly ENER (Unified National Electronic Register of Regulations of the Republic of North Macedonia), as a platform through which everyone can express, at least, his/her own opinion.

M: How many young people know about the ENER?

R2: Well, honestly, in this (focus) group maybe you and me, and outside this group maybe 0.01% of the people.

M: I think both R1 and R3 confirmed they know what ENER is. Yes, it is a very good mechanism for involving the public in the process. It can be very effective if used properly.

R3: Also, I would like to add, if that is not a problem, since we have mentioned the youth councils, national council... I think it is a serious problem that the youth councils do not function. I mean, it does not work, not everywhere. When it works, and that is an exception, most councils

don't really know what's the deal is and what the primary goal of youth council should be. I can talk about my town - we (youth organization) are cooperating with the youth council and all that, but they do not know the initial goal, it is not clear to them what the youth council is and what the functions of a youth council are, what it should do.

It seems the situation is similar in Serbia: I would like to conclude, in addition, that while there are certain mechanisms through institutions which are used, and there is some informal approach or peer education, and different workshops and engaging young people in such ways that later they are the ones leading some initiatives. I think that some more informal approach is extremely important because it provides some sort of continuity. The biggest problem when it comes to some institutional support, at least from my own experience or the circle of people in which I move in, is that it is not continuous. One government comes and tries one technique, and then it changes, so that technique is not valid anymore. I have come across situations in which young people, who are not overly involved in decision-making, learn and get used to a system through which they somehow can make decisions, exert some influence, start to believe that they are asked about things – but after the next elections that system is no longer valid.

This previous quote also shows one unexpected trait of the informal participation mechanisms – continuity, which would be expected out of formal, institutionalized one. Also, it seems that informal tools, or formal ones that allow for creativity to be expressed, are perceived more positively. They are more spontaneous, and young people have stronger sense of ownership as they create it out of their own need: *We wanted to implement one idea in the community we live in, and they (local administration) said they will cover the finances and logistics, so young people got engaged. Or, for example, you have Student Councils. They usually take initiatives, decorate the school themselves, make drawings... Especially in Ferizaj, there we have "Mural Fest" which is in fact already happening intensively in other municipalities, even in Pristina. Trough it we are replacing all the damaged facades with murals, and thus enriching the public space. And through them, through art forms, youth, of course, often express their dissatisfaction with the public policies. There is also another good example from Kosovo* which has gathered young people around the similar issue: decorating the city for winter holidays. It showcases how youth can get more engaged if innovative opportunities for consultations and activism are provided:*

R1: We also deal with issues which are not part of the project. For example, as a member of an organization, the project I am working on is about extremism, but I am also an environmentalist and a feminist, and I am active in many issues. Maybe this example sounds funny, but for us this was not funny. It is about decorating the city for the New Year's holiday, which was not done (by the authorities), we even talked to the civil society organizations and no one wanted to react. So, I started to post on social network, and I started "attacking" the municipality authorities. I used satire, and things like that... And in the end, it was done (the city was decorated). Until recently they used to call me a "Christmas tree activist." So, this is one example...

M: Did young people join you in this initiative?

R1: I think, yes, they joked also, commented...

Another example from Serbia talks about spontaneous nature of such mechanisms, and how wide and inclusive they can be: *I would definitely say that young people may not be aware of how important their participation is, and that the informal mechanism you have mentioned are very important, at least as an initial step to show some initiative. I remember the situation from the protests when a young man who was 17 or 18 years old was arrested, and when the whole school came out to protest because of this. I was thrilled with their initiative and how peacefully they did it. I think that such (informal) initiatives should become usual approach for some other problems that young people are facing, even in high school. Like if they are dissatisfied with a teacher, with some informal way they could try to address the problem. I know (dissatisfaction with a teacher) maybe it is a bit a banal example, but at that high school level – if something like that develops in a person when in high school, then when they grow up they will understand some things and it will be easier for them to engage. I would say that for young people of 15 to 20 years old, an informal way of functioning and organizing is very important. And I hope, like her (the previous respondent), that these mechanisms will improve in the future. Novi Sad was obviously a good way how to do that. I hope we will have something similar in Belgrade.*

Much of the provided examples of informal mechanisms during the FG discussions, including those presented here, are based on the use of the Internet. It is safe to assume that even the last example presented here – about the high school pupils' protest – was at least to some extent organized via Internet. That is inevitable given the fact that the youth we included in the study, and the youth that FG participants are talking about, are *digital natives*. This opens a whole new set of question about how formal, institutional participation mechanisms are inclusive, given that youth communication patterns and habits do not really fit with how institutions are set and like to communicate. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this study, but respondents did raise some important questions when talking about Internet communication in general: safety, miscommunication, and fake news. Across the groups there are obviously different takes on good and bad sides of using Internet, but there definitely is awareness, and to some extent concerns, about the risks of using the Internet:

M: A question for everyone: what are the bad sides, and what are the good sides when using the Internet for youth participation?

R1: I am not sure. As my colleague says, considering that we did not make it, that very often we do not choose how to use it, but we are pushed to using it in a certain way. However, it is a brainwashing machine that has been actively working on it (brainwashing) for more than a decade...

M: R2, please tell me, what do you see as a positive, and can the Internet have some positive effects?



R2: It can, as long as there are free people using it. As much as people are free on it. But it is evident that the Internet has become much less free in the last ten years than it was when it started. Starting with some simple things: you all remember probably when YouTube had no comments, there was nothing taking you to some video, you were just wandering through that electronic platform and you could get whatever you wanted, and no one could pay to get you to his video faster...how much is the Internet, in general, a way for people to become aware when it was made to make people less aware?...if there's a software or something to make youth more active – I don't mean social networks, I mean some software that would, for example, specifically ensure that their (youth) voice is heard in Montenegro – then I think that the Internet is very positive.

M: R3?

R3: I also share this opinion with R1, because I think that social networks are now more abusive – you have a lot of that false information... For example, my parents, my mother – when she sees something on Facebook, she thinks it's 100% true and you can't convince her that it is not...

M: R4?

R4: I wanted to say that I am a little older than then the rest, so I was closely listening to your experiences and I'm really cool with the fact that you have different opinions, but I would also like to remind us that we are in the 21st century and we need to keep up... Young people need to use social networks the right way...it is up to us to think about how we will use it and in what way, but not to be completely passive and don't use it. Today when you are not on social media you simply do not exist...

R5: ...I would like to refer to what we talked about earlier– the Internet, and the perfect way to participate. I think it is necessary to use the Internet, which has its downsides, but it also has its pros. What he (previous respondent) mentioned about what has happened somewhere in the West, and we know that the Arab Spring began on social networks. Well, then we have what is happening in our country(Montenegro), and in Serbia, the same thing (protests) started through social networks, although we have seen some unpleasant scenes (violence at the protests), but again we see that it is a way to express opinions. These are extreme examples, but that is how people express their attitudes and start some initiatives.

The question of Internet is going to be touched upon again when we analyze how COVID-19 crisis affected the youth participation. But the question of mechanisms, especially regarding the formal vs. informal discussions that was going on in the FGs, brings us to the important question of institutions, and how their openness is perceived by the respondents. This inclination of FG participants towards the informal participation mechanism may come from the fact that institutions, which should be "hosting" formal avenues of participation, are not being such a good host. We have seen from many examples in this and previous chapter that political party membership sometimes is the only way to get involved. But there are also other issues in the institutions FG participants expressed, that are still quite connected with political parties being sometimes the only channel for horizontal movement: *This reminded me of a public hearing we have organized. The local municipality received funds from the World Bank to build sports terrain, a multifunctional place for handball, volleyball, etc. So, they got those investments, hired experts, made a construction plan, built a stadium– but forgot to make seats for the spectators. So, at this public hearing, the coach of the volleyball team or something like that, told them: "Everything is fine, but we need other things. For example, where are the seats? Why don't you put two rows of seats because we have girls who have families, and other guests who want to sit to watch the game. And then the people from the municipality answered: "Oh, how come it never occurred to us to meet with you before?" I have told them... they have to include people who use the stadium, because there is no need to meet with me, as I have never played sports in my life. They must talk to the basketball team, the volleyball team... So that meeting lasted for two minutes ... It is a great loss. Two rows of chairs, which they now say they cannot add, because the construction is finished, so...*

Schools and universities provide opportunities for young people to get involved, and that is particularly notices by FG participants from Kosovo* and Montenegro. Especially when in universities, youth is more active and engaged during the studies (through Students Council and similar) about issues impacting them directly, but rarely about those that do not concern their student-related issues.

When young people get involved in activism, especially if they were supported or invited by their peers, there usually is some youth organization, other civil society organization (CSO) or informal group through which a young person can continue to be active and where s/he can get other opportunities to be involved. This is particularly important as CSOs can provide continuous support to the young activist, as well as to get access more easily to formal participation processes, and to the institutions in which these formal processes are taking place. However, because communication with bureaucratic institutions, like international donors and municipality or national authorities becomes dominant and frequent, the (youth) CSO takes over the specific jargon that sometimes pushes young activists away: *I believe that the language used when communicating with young people is very important, because... maybe not every young person in Serbia, but 90% of young people in Serbia actually want to make some changes. It is very important how we define it(a tool that they can use). If we define it in some "project" language, some NGO terms that are not clear to people outside of that bubble we have, I think it is very unlikely to expect that we will encounter someone's interest, and that someone will listen to us.*

Institutions have a similar problem, but maybe for a different reason. They sometimes are not transparent, they also tend to use the language that most of the people (including young) do not completely understand, or use channels of communication that are exclusive, like the web-sites which are not so popular and are not that much visited:

R1: The municipality published all the documents, and everything needed on the website. But people don't use those websites. When people want to get answers from the municipality, they do not go to websites to find answers, they go to Facebook and write to them, or go directly to the municipality... People think they are not transparent because people are not informed, because they do not know who to turn to for information. It goes without saying that, in order to be informed, citizens must be committed. But in order to be informed in Kosovo, you have to be very engaged. For example, to find a document in a website... expenditure reports for example: one report is published by the finance department, another by the mayor's office, and the third by the local assembly.*

M: This means that this way of communication is not very user friendly?

R1: No, it's not user friendly because it's vague. And then, if you are forced to call someone you know in the Municipality again and ask them about something you are interested in, then you are avoiding that "European" way and go back to the way things are usually getting resolved in the Balkans. I do not think that they are transparent, because again, when they do not have cooperation with the citizens, there is no space for transparency. You cannot say that there is transparency and public debate when only 20 people will show up at the debate.



COVID-19 CRISIS VS. YOUTH PARTICIPATION

It was already presented in the opening chapters that expecting respondents to analyze and predict any further developments and connections between the COVID-19 and youth participation as the pandemic is still ongoing is unfair and unrealistic. However, there are some insights that may help us understand what are some initial reactions and learnings of FG participants that may point us to possible correlations between the two phenomena.

When it comes to the assessment of how different national and local governments reacted to the pandemic, there is a different situation across the group. While most of the respondents are agreeing that initial strict measures were inevitable, *since everything was new and nobody knew what we were dealing with, it seems that FG youth from Serbia are dissatisfied with the fact the national government did not take the virus seriously enough at first, and then suddenly switched to very strict measures. This created the feeling of mistrust and added an additional layer of uncertainty: I definitely didn't like the fact that at the beginning it was a joke not only to the people around me... but to our governing bodies, it was funny. "We survived the sanctions, and we can survive the corona". It was a wrong thing to do at the beginning because then people listened to it and thought that it is nothing terrible and they did not care for any kind of measures. I can understand that to some extent.*

Like the understanding among almost all FG participants that strict measures were inevitable at the beginning of the pandemic, whether they liked them or not, it is common to all that they do not see those strict measures really being practiced by the citizens (especially after people got a bit relaxed), nor strictly implemented and managed by the local and national governments: It was very good at the beginning, but we can say that it has been a catastrophe since the mid-May... when I enter the municipality building, for example, in the municipality of Ferizaj, there are no disinfectants... sometimes when I go, they don't have masks at all, the security lets people in to do business and pick up documents or whatever they have to do. What is even worse is that officials working in public institutions should set an example to citizens, but on the contrary...

The way how these young people assess the reactions of the officials, and how they see youth get organized and active in different ways (or not getting active, like some of the respondents from B&H and Montenegro have mentioned), provides a foundation for their understanding of how this pandemic, or other similar crisis that may emerge, could affect how and in what way young people will participate in decision-making. At one hand, they are recognizing that systems that are not open for participation are getting more closed in the time of crisis, and similarly – that systems (like health) which are not managed and set properly, fail even more when needed the most:

R1: I would not like to repeat myself, but since we have talked about participation, I think that the state has shown how little interest it has for such things. At that time (pandemic outbreak), we saw a system breaking so many times, and the only way to (the government could) deal with so many people was to have lockdown and absolute control. And I think that's why we succumbed to it as an only option in our country. I don't think we literally have the capacity to do better than that...

M: ...usually in crises people gather around the leader and that is somehow a normal reaction, you look for some certainty, you look for someone who will tell you what to do... What do you think of that, is it something that is positive or negative in our case?

R2: It is a difficult question, but I will do my best to answer. We have seen a lot of positive aspects of leaders, statesmen such as in Italy, their prime minister who encouraged citizens to adhere to the measures, encouraged them to defeat this virus. People were not intimidated and accused, like we were (Serbia).

M: R3?

R3: I think that many problems of our society, which are not small at all, are yet to emerge. We can see, they are emerging now. The censorship of the media that existed at that time somehow corresponded to the entire regime... No, I do not think that people, at least the younger population, did look for the leader, because in our country people have to take care for themselves, unfortunately. We do not have functional institutions, so in this situation we did not have them as well. We are seeing this now clearly, and it is completely insane to hold elections in the middle of a pandemic...

I think that the situation found us unprepared, and that is normal, and it was expected for system to fail, but not to this extent. I have experienced, and I am still experiencing the process and procedures when having the corona virus, as I am one of the sufferers. I can say that the support system that was introduced for the COVID-19 does not work on many ends.

On the other hand, there are positive outcomes of the pandemic that were recognized across the FGs. Firstly, it is solidarity and youth activism, their engagement and readiness to help their peers, the elderly, and other people in need:

R1: One nice thing I saw was that they (young people) wanted and really helped during this pandemic. That they took matters into their own hands and participated a lot to help elderly fellow citizens, people with disabilities who were not able to procure medicines and food. Our society is very solidary in these difficult moments, and I am very glad that this solidarity has awakened, that they want to help, that they want to engage...

M: How about you R2?

R2: I agree with all of you. I think that young people are, in the true sense of that word, leaders of the future. Throughout this situation, they have shown that with their ideas and initiatives, their readiness to help on the ground and their willingness to organize various online meetings and initiatives.

Another important positive outcome is the focus on self-development and actually the attitude of using what is out there in the given moment: *If there is anything good in this whole situation, it is the moment that everyone has really turned to the use of existing technology for the sake of not stopping the communication and learning...* We can see how much the percent of e-banking suddenly came to life in Serbia. Something like this had to happen for people to understand the benefits of it. I think this whole situation has opened a lot of new fields where people will have to find ways to use the technology that is available. And thus, some obstacles that used to be real - moments where young people would give up - will no longer be obstacles. As we have seen, certain faculties give lectures in the same way as we are talking now... now in some sense all institutions and all businesses also have to find some responsible ways to deal with the topic of how to continue to function in all this which is new. I think we are turning to technology as a nation, in general. But on the other hand, I think that as much as it eases that moment of participation, because now everyone can do things from home, we need to be very careful not to be abused at some point. It is still being developed.

Internet, as a participation tool has already been discussed (please see page 31), but that question has been put in motion again while focusing on the effects of COVID-19. Example in the paragraph above, as well as the next one, also shows the belief that COVID-19 has made youth use Internet more, and that it will have positive effects on how people collaborate with one another:

R1: Young people became even more engaged with Zoom meetings, online lectures, various seminars online, workshops with children... Mostly, as far as seminars and everything are concerned, there was a way to do it all online and to make the most of the time we spend at home: to learn something new, to connect with more people.

M: R1, do you think that all these online tools, when it comes to youth action, that now there are some e-tools, as one of the tools, a method, for youth to influence the shaping of their communities in the future? Did I understand that well?

R1: You did. This very situation with the corona virus has actually forced and pressured people to focus more and learn some more about technology and how to apply it in their everyday life. Especially since, for example, more online tools are used to enroll in college. It is much easier for students to enroll and learn something new. Also, schools and universities have started to offer more space online, provide free seminars, courses... to support young and even older people as much as possible, so I think it is good on the one hand.

However, not all young participants of the FGs are perceiving only positive aspects of how Internet could affect youth participation – despite they have started to use Internet after it stopped being free recourse and got almost totally commodified, some are pointing out the negative aspects of the Internet as well, and how that can (negatively) affect youth participation as well:

I think that Internet simplifies some things, but it is a double-edged sword. I think that... every citizen of China has an accounts on some application and they get surveyed whether they are satisfied with utilities in a city for example, so the government knows whether they are doing their job well, if they have made some mistakes, what they need to correct, what to do, etc. I think that in that way the Internet is helpful, but as a means of spreading misinformation or as a mass media that could influence how the opinions are being formed, it can be abused.

Finally, the majority of FG participants are optimistic in a sense that youth from the region will continue to be active and more involved in the decision making:

M: R1, what do you think? How will this crisis affect this process of youth participation in the future?

R1: I sincerely hope that young people will be even more engaged in decision-making, in helping out, so I think that it should be more than it is now and what it was in the period when the crisis began.

M: R2, how does that work for you and what do you expect?

R2: During the lockdown, I really liked it – it brought me some good things, to the people around me, but I don't know how the other young people reacted to that. I don't think they were very enthusiastic and didn't see many good sides from all that ...I hope that the lockdown influenced the awakening of a desire to participate, a greater desire to socialize and some drive to emerge within young people. Somehow, I trust that isolation has helped us to wake up a bit.

R3: I think it will go uphill for sure as far as youth participation is concerned. I mean youth representation in organizations. I am not sure how many years it will be and how it will go, but I am certain that the participation and commitment of young people in any organization or institution will be valued on a much higher level.

R4: I share their opinion. People will demand more and more of their rights, and that requires inclusion, so that is the only way to reach a goal, so they will have to be active. Everyone would like changes to happen, they are fighting for some of their ideas to happen and they can only do that through the system and there will certainly be more people involved.





WESTERN BALKANS YOUTH AND THE EU - SHARED VALUES AND VALUES SHARED LESS

The desk review has shown what are the trends among youth when it comes to assessing the EU values, and how important those values are to the youth in general. Focus group's participants are dominantly pro-EU, so it is important to know what makes them supporters of the EU accession process, and how they feel about it given that the process lasts for a long time for the entire WB.

Across the board, FG participants are disappointed with the length of the process. There is a distinction between those who blame the society for not changing fast enough to reach the standards on one hand, and those who also think that the EU is not doing "their part of the job" on the other. There are a couple of quotes that provide very rich argument on the importance of joining the EU, as well as why the pace is slow:

Just like others, I think we (Albania) are going slow, not very slow, but slow. And I think that a lot of time will pass, and that everything that the EU has given us, everything is still in the initial phase, we have not closed the chapters yet, and we have a lot to do with corruption...And we need time, a lot of time to join the European Union.

It seems to me that he (previous FG participant) has mentioned that there are criteria, the so-called Copenhagen and Madrid criteria. However, those criteria are somehow put aside, and joining the EU is always a political decision. The best example comes from 2007, both Bulgaria and Romania. Do you think that there is no corruption in Bulgaria and Romania, that there are efficient institutions? Far from it. It was exclusively a political decision for those countries to join the EU, and at that moment it was strategically important.

I would like to say that the EU is not exactly in such a great situation as we all think. You have, in Hungary, in Poland... I will not say dictatorships, but you have autocrats, who put pressure on NGOs.... Especially in Hungary where universities are being closed... I think that Montenegro is going slowly, very slowly, although our Government will not say that publicly. But I think it is good...I think that Montenegro needs to become a well-consolidated democracy in order to become an EU member state so that it does not happen, when we become an EU member state, we slide towards authoritarianism. That is why I believe that this process should go slowly, because we are not yet a country that respects all European values.

I used to think that we should not enter the EU, and now I think that we should, because especially after Brexit and some things – I feel that it is a phase that we need to go through. Because I think it's like an essential test for standardization of a state in modern era. So, in general, it is a test for Bosnia and Herzegovina, that's all it is. In terms of economy, human rights, etc. Whether we can go along with the world at all. The EU is more like getting a verification that we are more or less functional in the modern sense...

But what is it about the EU that (still) makes it appealing for these young people? What is it that they are looking for and hoping the EU will bring? Before some illustrative citations, here are some key words – positive associations and values prioritized by the FG participants:

solidarity
tolerance
innovation
gender
transparency
inclusiveness
equality
multiculturalism
education
democratization
volunteering



The education was mentioned the most, not just because young people are interested in education themselves, but also because there is a broad understanding that quality education, that promotes critical thinking and questioning things, from primary schools, is essential for democratization of the entire society. The following citation points that as an important habit: *The only thing that surprises me is the thinking and behavior of their young people. A young person in Western Europe, as well as in America, knows that he has the right to ask a question, to have the right to protest. At lectures at my place in Banja Luka, young people rarely ask questions, or question the professor's opinion. They take it for granted. We had a professor who was banned from entering Canada because he wrote a book that was really based on Islamophobia, and his idea and presentation of Islam was all negative. And then I was amazed with how many young people I was sitting with in a lecture would not question his opinion, no one would question whether that professor might be wrong.*

FG Participants were also asked to pick a city in that is closest to an EU city, i.e. a city in which one could feel the most like in the EU. Participants have picked different places, but the characteristic of each selected was similar. This short description of a city in Montenegro, sums up what other participants associate with the EU: *Kolašin, I would say Kolašin, seriously. Podgorica is the closest to EU's consumerism, everything is there, but it is not true that you are the most accepted in Podgorica, or that differences are the most tolerated there. I have been in Podgorica for the last 23 years. Kolašin is a very, very inclusive city and very tolerant, very patient, full of communication.*



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is hard to reflect on participation of youth particularly (or any other group in particular) where participation and practices of inclusiveness are generally rare or inefficient. Democracy is under threat in the WB6. The ruling parties are blocking any kind of participation, they have the tendency to control the media, public resources, making the membership in the political party *sine qua non* for any type of advancement and development. Previously this year Freedom House have assessed every society in the WB6 as *Transitional or Hybrid Regimes*¹⁰⁸, defining this concept as: *...typically electoral democracies that meet only minimum standards for the selection of national leaders. Democratic institutions are fragile and substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties exist. The potential for sustainable, liberal democracy is unclear.*

The latest Policy Brief of the Clingendael Institute for International Relations¹⁰⁹ describes WB6 as a region of “captured states”: *State capture mechanisms selectively strengthen the ruling party and its leadership while it weakens the opposition and independent institutions. State capture weakens the effectiveness of EU conditionality and reduces the credibility of the EU enlargement process.* It further describes the state capture as...*a process in which (political) actors infiltrate state structures with the help of clientelist networks and use these state structures as a mantle to hide their corrupt actions. These political elites can exploit their control over state resources and powers for private or party-political gain. In its most extreme form, state capture entrenches itself into every part and level of society and state, leading to the monopolisation of power in the hands of one political party and its leadership.* Using Serbia as a case study, it highlights that *public resources are used to control the media, which allows the Serbian government to remain in charge of the narrative that the media shapes about the Serbian government and the EU.* Painfully precisely depicting the situation, it presents one of its effects: *when a corrupt government oversees who receives (economic) opportunities and who does not, young and talented people often prefer to move away, resulting in the so-called ‘brain drain’ phenomenon, which is one of the main challenges in the Western Balkans.*

The above-presented analysis is a couple of steps away to give us the root causes for such situation. It could have gone more deeply into explaining the effects which major powers have over the region, and how their influence shapes up the democracy or undermines it (it actually goes in that direction to some extent), and/or go more deeper into the political culture, democratic tradition, and history of the region to explain the current situation. But even without it, it clearly describes the level of democracy development, the political and social context in general, and makes us wonder if any kind of participation is possible with such regimes. Or let's have a more challenging thought – is there something that youth has that could break the barriers and open democratic process, thus allowing for (its own) participation? Whatever the answer is, discussion and dialogue about youth participation should come second, once there are open democratic institutions in place and the will and general set of rules that understands and promotes democratic practices and values, including the inclusive decision making. Once there are foundations of democracy, we should start discussing and implementing various mechanisms and tools appropriate for youth participation and for addressing specific youth issues. As well as participation of any other group.

The general issues WB6 societies are facing are similar, and the effects they have on the youth – or the specific issues youth are facing – are similar as well. As we have seen from the examples provided by the research participants, they are quite aware that ruling political parties tend to block participation, and that institutions on both national or local level do not really provide opportunities for dialogue and are not open for (youth) participation. Also, same as our societies, youth is divided by the dominant narratives inducted by the political elites. Ethnic, political, or other divisions and even polarization is, as expected, present and manifested in youth corpus like in any other. But do these shared issues, shared experiences, the common feelings on anger, disappointment, defiance...of many young men and women, as well as shared values and expectations- can actually be a place to build a common platform for a more inclusive society, one which will allow youth (and others) its place in the decision-making? The various research clearly shows there are divisions in youth corpus. One of those is obvious in this study-while the group that participated in the FG discussions is interested and highly motivated to participate and fight for more openness, there is a majority, in each society, not really interested to take part, probably pushed away by many failed attempts of democratization and slow and unjust economic development, or resultless activities and actions of political elites. Youth also seems to be closed in their own bubbles in which they confirm their own opinions and become less willing to engage in constructive dialogue about common issues with youth from other bubbles. Trust between people suffers in that kind of environment, which further limits the opportunity for joint and more inclusive and wider initiatives and actions. The emergence of local initiatives and social movements, usually based around simple, local-priority issues that are visible by everyone in the community and/or threaten the entire communities

¹⁰⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=nit&year=2020> (Accessed on: 30th of September 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Maarten Lemstra, (2020). Policy Brief - The Destructive Effects of State Capture in The Western Balkans. EU Enlargement Undermined, The Hague, Clingendael Institute

(like the issues of gentrification, investors vs. citizen-centered urbanization, ecological devastation, corruption...) are, apart from giving us hope, also indicating low trust in institutions, political parties and civil society organizations. People are gathering in rallies by themselves, not really willing to be labelled as CSOs, nor to be associated with the traditional political parties.

This issue of trust may be the key one. For youth led initiatives to be more credible and achieve results, they probably should be more inclusive, wider, and built upon solving issues that most of the (young) people care about. One of the examples of an FG participant, about how young people got activated spontaneously, provides an informative description: *For example, five days ago I think, they started cutting trees in the Main Park in Pančevo (Serbia). Because of the initiative of some young people a lot of other people, citizens took to the streets and they stopped it. So one idea – to stop cutting down trees in the park managed to gather people – you could have seen a footage of 10-year-olds removing fences (where the cutting supposed to happen) – and no one is forcing them to do it. They happen to be in the park at that time, and they joined idea because they don't want to give it up. It is very difficult to show people what it means and how important their role is in some broad joint initiative. I believe that only when people experience something personally, and see that they can make some impact, they can truly understand forms and opportunities for participation and that they can have a voice in many matters, and feel better about themselves.* Also, one of the most important findings is that activism, which is inevitable part of youth participation since participations does not just happen – it requires engagement, exists only when supported by others. It can be, and at one point it is individual activity, but to thrive and be effective, it requires support. So, to add to the previous sentence: activism is inevitable part of youth participation, and participations does not just happen – it requires collective engagement.

Building bridges of understanding between youth groups with different interest could be the way to build more inclusive and wider initiatives. This bridging between different groups could happen among youth in each society, as well across the region – for example through a regional activity that focuses on a single issue that people, not just youth, in the entire region, care about. This stronger and tighter connectedness between different youth groups could lead to greater support and solidarity. As we have seen many times in region's history, especially when there are *hybrid regimes* or *captured states* in place, people sometimes take different risks to fight for more democracy and more open society, and those risks are better mitigated or handled if there are strong relationships – they are key threads in a net of support and solidarity.

In order to find out more about where the differences are, about the motivation for participation or about the reason for the lack of it, and what unites majority of youth, more regional research studies need to be conducted:

1. A regional, yearly tracker designed to capture shifts in trends of key values the youth stands for, issues they are considering the most pressing, and their aspirations – would provide for better understanding on how regional and wider events and dynamics are influencing youth motivation and potentials, and provide foundations for more grounded joint activities and alliances.
2. Participation in the decision-making processes is tightly connected to (political) activism. Participation is about being actively engaged in the process, having a say and the sense of the ownership of the process, as well as being accountable for the decisions being made. Although there is not that much participation in the decision-making, young people, across the region, are active in different ways. This was especially visible during the peaks of the COVID-19 crisis, in which many people, including youth, have showed solidarity with the seniors in their communities for example. In other crisis as well, like during the massive floods that have affected the region (like in 2014, for example in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia...) youth have also showed a high level of solidarity and were ready to help out, financially and in other ways. In general, as the philanthropic donations are on the rise, and as there is more people who believe that "if everyone would give as much as she/he could, however little that may be, a big enough sum could be raised to contribute to changes for the good", rather than "Common citizens can help somewhat but it is never enough" and "Only wealthy individuals can give enough money to make donations relevant."¹¹⁰, it would be interesting to further investigate if, within this solidarity potential, there are any potentials for democratic transformation – whether people who believe that a lot of small individual efforts can do good to a person or community, can move towards believing that entire societies can change for the better if a lot of people chip in their time, skills and willpower to make that change.
3. As stated before, one of the limitations of this research is that the rich qualitative data on the understanding and motivation comes from representatives of a rather small group of young people who are already politically (in a broadest sense) active through their political or civil society organizations, in their local communities or on a national level. Researching this group's opinions and attitudes was inevitable to understand how the system functions, what are the tools at their disposal and how they feel about it. However, although we do know that majority of youth in the region are not active in this sense, there is limited data on why they are not more active, what's missing there for them to become more engaged and to take part in the decision making or at least demand to be acknowledged. A focused approach to this group, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches could provide better understanding and possibly suggest ways to better and wider involvement of youth in general.

¹¹⁰ Vesić, Aleksandra, Momčilović, Tomas Bueno, Koeshall, Nathan (2019). Comparative Analysis of Public Opinion on Philanthropy in the Western Balkans, Belgrade, Catalyst Balkans. p. 50

4. Informal participation tools and forms used by young people are initially more democratic as they do not require particular technical knowledge, or the expert knowledge of policy development processes. They are usually spontaneous, sometimes impulsive, or “made” out of things most youth are familiar of using and playing with, like online/IT tools, social media and alike. Because they have bigger democratic, or inclusive potential, it would be interesting to investigate them further – what makes them more or less appropriate for youth participation in the region, why they are appealing, what are their top features. As they are informal, sometimes made-on-the-spot, fluid, it is a bit challenging to capture them and understand them. Also, as most of them are Internet-based, it is important to understand downsides and risk associated with them. Furthermore, better understanding of these tools that youth uses could provide valuable insights and possible solutions for the democratization of the official mechanisms for youth participation.

5. There are regional co-operation mechanisms in the WB aimed to connect youth and provide them with the framework to work and cooperate across the borders (administrative and fictional). One of the things this study lacks the most is the assessment of these mechanisms and bodies, especially regarding to which extent they are in line with to youth’s needs, and where are opportunities for further cooperation and structural connections both horizontally (regional aspect) and vertically (local <—> national <—> regional).

ANNEX I – SCREENER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What age group do you belong to?
2. Are you a:
 - a) Member of a political party
 - b) Member of a civil society organization or a member of/ activist within an informal group
 - c) Working in public administration (local/national)
 - d) Public official
 - e) Other
3. In general, what is your attitude towards the EU? Express your attitude on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means you have absolutely negative attitude, and 7 means you have absolutely positive attitude. You can use any number on the scale.
4. What is your attitude towards your country’s accession to the EU? Mark the statement that is closest to your position.
 - f) It would be good for my country to join the EU
 - g) Not sure
 - h) It would be bad for my country to join the EU
 - i) Irrelevant
5. In the last year, have you personally (as a representative of the organization or in any other capacity) participated in the decision-making process, at the national and / or local level? By participation in the decision-making process we mean participation in working groups, bodies, or a like, in the formulation of draft laws, development of strategies and plans, assessment of policy effects and the like?

Yes

No
6. How would you assess your experience in decision-making processes in your country? We consider participating in the decision-making as participating in working groups, bodies, or a like in formulating draft laws, drafting strategies and plans, assessing the effects of policies and the like? Evaluate your experience using a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means that you evaluate your experience as very small, and 7 as quite big. You can use any number on the scale.
7. Regardless of experience, how do you assess your knowledge of youth participation in decision-making processes in your country, regardless of the type of participation (policy making, plans...) or level (national, local). Express your attitude on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means that you assess your knowledge as very small, and 7 as quite big. You can use any number on



the scale.

8. What gender are you?
9. What is the last level of education you have acquired?
10. Where were you born?
 - a. The capital
 - b. Some other city
 - c. Small town/village
11. Compared to your generation, in your country, would you say that you have more, the same, or less money than the others? Think about the average amount of money you have at your disposal during a month, regardless of whether you have earned it, someone gave it to you, etc.
12. How often have you participated in group online video meetings on the Zoom platform in the last 6 months, regardless of the topic and number of participants?
13. How do you assess the Internet connection you use most often? Choose the description that is closest to your experience:
 - j) Great, I can watch videos without any problems, I can easily participate in video calls, I can quickly download and download content from the Internet.
 - k) Well, with less problems I can watch video content, with less interference I participate in video calls, I can download and download content from the Internet at a moderate speed.
 - l) Bad, I can watch videos with great problems, I participate in video calls with great interference, I can slowly download and download content from the Internet.
14. Name and surname:
15. Email:
16. Phone number:
17. Name of the organization:

ANNEX II – INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

- Explanation of principles of discussion in focus group and expectations from participants
- Guarantees of anonymity,
- Participants briefly introduce themselves in terms of age, interests, activism/NGO background and experience, place of origin....

PARTICIPATION – GENERAL

- How do you understand “youth participation”? How would you define it? How would you describe it to a 10-year-old child?
- And “consultative process”? How would you define that? Again, how would you describe it, in a few words, to a 10-year-old child?
- “Decision making process?” Again, explain as simply and briefly as possible.
- When you say “youth”, who do you have in mind? All youth, or some specific youth? Imagine one single person that could represent “youth” - is it she or he? How exactly old s/he is? Where s/he lives? How s/he feels? What are s/he's interests? Aspirations? Fears? Is s/he interested in her/his local community/ country/society?
- In general, how willing is youth to participate in consultative/ decision making processes? What do you think are the topics/areas youth should participate in, in your mind? Are there particular topics that youth should not be interested in? What is your experience in regard to these topics - in which youth are more interested to participate, and in which less? Why do you think that is? What motivates them?
- Have these (dominant) topics changed over the years? Why do you think that is?

PARTICIPATION - TOOLS AND FORMS

- Talking about the participation - what are the forms of youth participation? Are they institutional or informal? Which are better in your opinion? Why? Are there any circumstances when informal is better than institutional? And vice versa? Please explain.
- What does youth participation look like? Which forms of youth participation are you familiar with? Can you describe any in more detail? And how would you rate different forms - which are allowing more participation than others? Why do you think that is?
- What makes them participative? Is that a good thing or bad? Why do you think so?
- What tools does youth have at their disposal to participate in consultative processes? Which ones are the best, in your mind? Why? What makes one better than the other?
- How would a perfect tool and/or mechanism for youth participation look like? What makes it perfect? Describe it please. Are there any good tools/mechanisms used before, but are not being used anymore? (if yes) What is good about them? Why do you think they are not being used anymore?
- (If nobody mentions) What are good and what are the bad sides of Internet tools for youth participation? Which ones



are you familiar with? Which one do you prefer and which ones you do not like? Why? Can you give some examples? How do you see new technologies changing participation in general? What are the opportunities, and what are the threats?

- What impacts/changes you have seen because of youth taking part in consultative processes? Do you see a toll and/or form having anything to do with the changes happening or not? Please explain. Please provide examples.
- How can youth change the way participative/ consultative processes work?

PARTICIPATION – INSTITUTIONS

- How do institutions change in your country? Are they changing at all? That fact, that they are (not) changing - is that a good thing or bad? Have you seen any particular aspect changing in the course of the last 1 to 3 years? Is openness one of those aspects or not? How do you see that change in the future?
- How do institutions serve - the government, the citizens, political parties...? Is that changing over time? Are institutions playing a role you would like them to play or not? Why is that?
- In general, how would you describe the level of openness of institutions in your country? How much trust do you have in institutions? Why? Are there any differences, or you view them all the same?
- Which types of institutions are the most accessible, in terms of citizen participation? Is there a difference between the legislative and executive branch? Why? Do you see any other differences? How that openness look? Please give an example. And to the young people in particular - are there any differences between openness to citizens' and youth participation? Which are, and which are not open to youth participation? Why do you think that is? What makes an institution open or not anyway?
- What are your experiences with *(local/national)* institutions? How open are they? Are you familiar with differences between openness of institutions on the local and national level? Why do you think there are differences? Are there any regional *(within country)* differences? Why is that?
- *(if you feel there is enough time)* Are you familiar to what extent institutions are open to citizen participation in other WB6 countries *(name other countries if necessary)*? *(if yes)* Which countries are you familiar with? How does your country compare to those countries re: openness of institutions for citizen participation?

PARTICIPATION - REASONS AND MOTIVATION

- Why do you personally take part in the decision-making process? What motivates you? What excites you? How does that make you feel? What do your close friends think of your participation in consultative and/or decision-making processes? Do they approve it/ support you, or not? Are they interested in that or are they indifferent? What about your parents? What about your partner? What about your neighborhood?
- Are there any particular topics you are interested in? Why those? Why not some others *(name some other that haven't been mentioned)*? Have your priorities and/or interests changed over time? *if yes* How come?
- Would you say that you proactively look for opportunities to take part in those processes, or do you wait for opportunities to happen? Why is that? *(for proactive approach)* Can you give an example? Why did you act? What was the outcome? *(for a more passive approach)* Can you give an example? Why was that a rather passive approach/ why did you decide to wait? What was the outcome?
- When you are participating in a consultative process - how do you consider to be your opponents? Why is that? How do you deal with that?
- And what about your supporters? Why is that? How do you cooperate with them? Is there anyone who is indifferent? Are you trying to involve them or not? Why? Have those roles - opponents, allies, those indifferent changed from one consultative process to another? Or during one such process? What exactly has changed? Why do you think so?

- Are there any consultative processes you are proud about? Briefly describe the goal, host institution, mechanism? What made you feel proud?

EU VALUES

- Let's get back to that 10 y.o kid from the beginning - how would you explain to him/her what is democracy? What are some core democratic values? There is that kid again - pick one value you find most important and explain it - how does one practice that value? How should a whole society practice it?
- What is your core value? How do you practice that value in your everyday life? Why is that one so important?
- What is the level of democracy development in your country? Are you happy with that level or not? Why? What should improve first? What aspect of it are you satisfied with? And what about the EU? Is your country moving too slow, too fast, or just right towards the EU?
- What is it that the EU has that your country does not, in terms of values, practices, mechanisms? What is the first thing you would like to see happen/ take place in your country that the EU is characterized by? What else? Why is that important?
- If you would have to pick one city in your country that is "the most European city", which one would you pick? Why? And which one is the least European? Why?
- Is there anything in the EU (in terms of values, practices, mechanisms) that you do not want to see in your country? Why is that? Is there anything in your country (value, practice, mechanism) that you would like to see more of in your country?

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AFTER COVID19

- How do you feel about COVID19? Did it affect you personally in any way (*getting sick, losing someone, losing a job...*)? Did it affect any of your friends, family?
- How satisfied are you with how your government, in general, reacted to it? How would you describe that reaction? Do you support limitations regarding movement, economy in your country... or not? To what extent?
- There is a global debate about whether to, in times of crisis like COVID19, focus to preserve the health of the population and shut down/ sacrifice the economy, or keep the economy running, with a risk to people's health. There seem to be some good arguments for both options. How do you feel about that dilemma? What would you choose? Why?
- With the global, still ongoing COVID19 crisis in mind, what do you think the societies should do - opt for a stronger, clear leadership and more centralized power, or be more democratic and open? What would you like to see happening in your country? Out of those two, in which direction do you think your country should go? Why? Is it going in that direction or not?
- Thinking about COVID19 - how that affected any youth participation/ consultative process you may have been part of? Or other similar processes you are familiar with? And in the future, after COVID19 and with the notion of global risks of new pandemics, how will youth participation look like in your country? Will it change? How? What are some good and what are some bad aspects of it?

WRAP-UP

- Reactions to the: topic, moderation, technical aspects...? Any other feedback?
- Anything important re: youth participation we have missed to ask.



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