

Young Cities in North Macedonia

Young Cities is the youth pillar of the Strong Cities Network (SCN). SCN is a global network of cities, created in recognition of the important role that local governments play in preventing polarisation, hate and extremism and safeguarding democratic values. The network is demand-driven, responding to cities' needs and priorities by providing a platform for peer learning and supporting contextualised application of international good practice. It supports cities across three strategic pillars focused on national- local cooperation, multi-actor collaboration and youth engagement.

Young Cities leverages the network's connection with cities globally to enhance youth-oriented P/CVE programmes and policy on a local level. Young Cities works with youth, municipal actors, and civil society, building their capacities individually and facilitating collaboration between them to support a cohesive effort to protect and empower young people against hate, extremism, and radicalisation. Young Cities is dedicated to enhancing the role that young people play in their communities as peacebuilders and supporting cities to craft policy that is inclusive and representative of its young citizens' needs.

Since its establishment, the SCN has expanded to include over 150 members from all over the world.

The SCN expanded its membership to the Western Balkans in 2016, welcoming 45 municipalities from the region, nine of which are in North Macedonia¹.

In 2020, Young Cities built upon the successful engagement in Gostivar and Čair and responded to the municipalities' needs to empower its youth as partners in strengthening social cohesion.

Youth Innovation
Labs Held:

4

Young Peacebuilders
Trained:

76

City Officials
Trained:

12

Youth-Led Projects Launched:

24

City Initiatives Supported:

2

Small Grants
Awarded

£78,575.08

Young People
Directly Impacted

3,011

Young People
Reached Digitally

1,127,194

¹For more on this, visit the SCN website where you can find our research outputs and programmatic delivery.
(<https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/?s=north+macedonia>)

The Youth Policy and Engagement Forum

The **Youth Policy and Engagement Forum** (referred to as the Forum) was a platform for policy-driven dialogue between local and central government institutions and 17 Young Cities Ambassadors – young people who have completed Young Cities' training programme and successfully delivered an initiative in their community through its small grants scheme².

One objective of Young Cities is to help make peacebuilding a more inclusive field for young people, which means we recruit a wide range of participants – including creatives, academics and activists – most of whom are outside of the political sphere and typically not included in policy programmes. So, while there are many worthwhile policy programmes for young people in North Macedonia already, Young Cities' Forum filled a gap by going beyond youth who have a vested interest in politics, and whose views and experiences may not represent those of wider population. The Forum brought new voices to the table and imparted a new appreciation for policy among young peacebuilders who often viewed their work in parallel to policy, rather than as an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution. Therefore, the Forum worked to bridge the gap between policy and youth by urging youth and policy makers alike to challenge their understanding of policy making and young people's involvement.

The Forum included two elements: a one-day policy workshop for the participating Ambassadors, followed two weeks later by a public forum with two closed round tables and three public panels.



Policy Workshop

The **policy workshop** introduced YC Ambassadors to policy making and how it can be leveraged as a tool to further their own social change objectives. They were tasked with identifying the policy priorities to discuss with local and national policy makers. These priorities were captured in a **Youth Priorities and Recommendations** document, that was shared with the Public Affairs Sector of the City of Skopje and Cabinets of the Mayors of Gostivar, Čair and Skopje. It was also shared with national government actors in the Secretariat of European Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education and Science, the Agency of Youth and Sport, and National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter Terrorism.



Public Forum

The **public forum** opened with two closed round tables – first with municipal, then with national representatives – where they discussed the Ambassadors' priorities point-by-point and sought to identify solutions together. During the three public panels, civil society and political party representatives joined the discussion on:

- (1) cooperation between municipalities and youth,
- (2) central government support for youth, and
- (3) collaborative approaches between youth activists and political party youth. The last panel was organised in cooperation with the International Republican Institute³.

²To see more about the Young Cities programme in North Macedonia and an overview of all the youth-led initiatives, check out our Young Cities North Macedonia Country book (link to the book on the website).

³The International Republican Institute (IRI)'s initiative Advanced Leadership in Politics Institute (ALPI) promotes social cohesion and youth-led collaboration across party divides to empower and create a space for young leaders, with opposing views or from different ethnic backgrounds, who are active and currently shaping policies within their own political parties.

Roundtables, Outcomes and Public Panels

The roundtables facilitated vibrant discussions that allowed YC Ambassadors to elaborate on their priorities and recommendations with municipal and central government officials and advocate for their proposed solutions. The YC Ambassadors highlighted meaningful and consistent participation as a systemic solution to disenfranchisement. In that vein, they underscored the importance of the Municipal Youth Councils, as stipulated in the Law on Youth Participation, as well as youth representation in Ministries that are responsible for youth funding to ensure mechanisms are more accessible to young people and correspond with their priorities and vision. Additionally, the YC Ambassadors stressed the need for a more strategic and comprehensive approach to youth inclusion by advocating for the drafting of youth strategies on a local level, developed in conjunction with the Youth Councils in the municipalities of Gostivar and Čair, and the city of Skopje.



The roundtables were followed by **three public panels** to discuss the theme of youth inclusion through central and local level institutions while acknowledging the importance of political parties in social change. The discussions were policy-driven and gave a fresh take on difficult issues which cause apathy and disenfranchisement.

Panel 1

Improving Cooperation between Youth and Municipalities

Featuring Čair Mayor Visar Ganiu and Kumanovo Mayor Maksim Dimitrievski, alongside two YC Ambassadors, Edina Elezi and Leutrim Bilalli, this panel discussed what the municipalities have done so far to make their institutions more inclusive for youth and their future plans. The YC Ambassadors stressed the importance of Youth Councils in the municipalities, and underscored that they want to participate in decision-making, rather than being informed after the fact. A key issue was the perception that access to municipal funding and opportunities for young people favours party members, which discourages other young people from participating. YC Ambassadors encouraged transparency and implementation of the Law on Youth Participation to avoid empty pledges from mayors and institutions.

Panel 2

How to Fund Youth for Social Change

Hosting Deputy Director of the Agency for Youth and Sport Amir Bilalli and YC Ambassadors Vlora Demiri and Art Spahiu, this panel examined some of the systemic challenges that plague funding for youth-led activities. In particular, the YC Ambassadors highlighted the disproportionate prioritisation of sport funding by the Agency of Youth and Sport, with a mere 6% dedicated to youth funding. The Deputy Director acknowledged the disproportionate budget priorities and agreed that youth initiatives needed more funding. However, he also elaborated on the constraints that the Agency faces in budget allocation, noting that it was not an easy fix.

Panel 3

The Role of Youth Political Party Wings in Creating Inclusive and Relevant Youth Policy at the Local Level

Hosting Deputy Director of the Agency for Youth and Sport Amir Bilalli and YC Ambassadors Vlora Demiri and Art Spahiu, this panel examined some of the systemic challenges that plague funding for youth-led activities. In particular, the YC Ambassadors highlighted the disproportionate prioritisation of sport funding by the Agency of Youth and Sport, with a mere 6% dedicated to youth funding. The Deputy Director acknowledged the disproportionate budget priorities and agreed that youth initiatives needed more funding. However, he also elaborated on the constraints that the Agency faces in budget allocation, noting that it was not an easy fix.

⁴ From Čair, she led the youth leadership initiative Shout Up and worked on the film project addressing Roma discrimination called Takat.

⁵ From Gostivar, he helped lead a training programme to empower youth activism called We Can and worked on a joint youth activism and political engagement project called We Unity.

⁶ From Gostivar, she has helped lead a film project called Breakfree to address bullying in high schools, including a fictional short film and documentary.

⁷ From Gostivar, he led a project called Use It that pushed young people to reclaim and protect public spaces, engendering ownership for their community.

⁸ The International Republican Institute is a US based non-partisan organization that promotes democracy worldwide. The goal of ALPI is to empower and create a space for young leaders, with opposing views or from different ethnic backgrounds, who are active and currently shaping policies within their own political parties. (<https://www.iri.org/resources/new-alpi-toolkit-empowers-next-generation-of-democratic-leaders/>)

⁹ From Skopje, she helps lead a youth magazine called Skala, a critical outlet for promoting local artists and utilising art as a means to promote social issues among a wide range of young people.

¹⁰ From Gostivar, he has worked on a project called Unity, that pushed youth wings of different political parties to cooperate on different social issues and a joint youth activism the political engagement project, We Unity.

Youth Inclusion in Policymaking for More Resilient Communities

Resilient communities require confidence in institutions. In the case of North Macedonia, the link between youth and institutions is one of the most challenging aspects of resilience. Young Cities conducted a Youth Resilience Study in North Macedonia, a quantitative survey of a representative youth population that is predicated on the BRAVE-14 attitudinal scale. It was designed to map and better understand the dynamics of resilience towards radicalisation on a community-wide scale by exploring five pillars of resilience. One of these pillars, called linking capital, measures confidence in institutions as well as the ability to contribute to or influence policy and decision making relating to one's own community. Out of the five pillars, linking capital in Čair and Gostivar ranked second to last, showing that trust in institutions is a serious issue. To improve linking capital, both municipalities must do more to provide a platform for policy driven dialogue between institutions and youth, and make existing platforms more inclusive and representative of the wider youth population.

Macedonian politics does make space for young people in the form of youth wings, access points that have become increasingly more active in most political parties in recent years. However, just as political parties do not represent all citizens, politically active youth do not represent all young people. According to the Westminster Fund for Democracy's Socio-political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia survey, only 7% of young people are political party members, while 20% identify themselves as supporters of a political party – a modest fraction of the youth demographic. Additional findings paint a worrying picture for young people's faith in institutions and the opportunities it affords them: 80% felt that authorities do not care about them at all, or only partially, and 60% felt that they cannot have an impact on the way authorities operate. It is therefore unsurprising that 71% described themselves as socially inactive citizens and only 8% reported having taken steps to solve a particular societal problem.

When political avenues are the primary – if not the only – means of participation, then the majority of young people in North Macedonia will be excluded. There is a need for a broader take on youth policy that goes beyond political party activists that can harness alternative means for engaging and involving young people.

Politics are not the only means of addressing social issues. Grassroots activism is critical for citizen-led change in local communities and Young Cities strives to create opportunities for young people to identify and address challenges on their own terms. The results have been inspiring; however, while grassroots activism exists outside of the political system, sustainable change requires institutional buy-in and activists need the confidence – in themselves and the system – to translate their community-based activities into policy solutions. Despite the aversion among many young people towards politics, policymaking is something that should be introduced as a tool that is accessible for all citizens who want to make a change and as natural progression of social activism. Change is needed at an institutional level, but also for young people to enhance their understanding of the system of governance and how to take advantage of the mechanisms in place. YC Ambassadors included this in their own recommendations, advocating for the Ministry of Education and Science to consider amending the Civic Education curriculum and introduce the system of governance to students.

¹¹ Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to strengthening democracy around the world. WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make political systems fairer and more inclusive, accountable and transparent. The study can be found at: <https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/youth-north-macedonia-optimism-apathy-or-disappointment>



Recommendations

The Young Cities Forum is an affirmation of the SCN's commitment to strengthening municipal-led efforts for more resilient communities with young people at the centre. It highlighted the need for representative youth inclusion in policymaking. Based on this, SCN makes two recommendations for policy makers in North Macedonia:

Pursue civic education for all young people to support a comprehensive understanding of the political system and policy making.

To participate fully, young people must understand the jurisdictions of institutions and the mechanisms in place to express their views or get support. This is the first step in improving the communication between public service and young people. Likewise, young people need a better understanding of policymaking as a complex process that results in specific and implementable action points and how it functions within and outside of politics. When youth know how to contribute to policy and have the appropriate avenues to do so, institutions will have a clearer understanding of how to best address youth needs in their community. Education can also offset some resentment as they understand what an institution can, and just as importantly, cannot do. In this way, civic education and capacity can help narrow the gap between institutions and youth.

Maintain a platform for moderated dialogue between young people and institutions.

The Forum's model allowed young people to present specific priorities and recommendations to institutions and discuss potential solutions. This model can be institutionalized through Local Youth Councils, via the Law on Youth Participation and hold moderated discussions with institutions on specific policy items and foster a more inclusive, policy-driven dialogue. This cooperation can help build confidence between young people and institutions for more resilient societies. The Youth Councils can only be successful, however, if they make a concerted effort to be inclusive, recruiting youth representatives from all sectors of society, not just from the politically active.
