



Needs assessment report

on challenges/barriers faced by local youth



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1. Executive Summary

This Needs Assessment was conducted within the framework of the PRECYOUS project, specifically under Work Package 4: Facilitating Youth and CSO Participation in Policy Development and Decision-Making, and more precisely under Activity 4.1: Analysis of the Challenges and Barriers Faced by CSOs and Young People in Informing Policy Decisions, and the Development and Implementation of Training Activities to Strengthen Their Capacity to Engage in Policy Dialogue at National and EU Levels. The overall aim of this activity is to enhance the involvement of young people and civil society organizations in policy making processes. Aligned with the broader goals of the project—namely, preventing violent extremism and promoting youth engagement through sports—this work contributes to the establishment of more inclusive and participatory governance structures in North Macedonia.

Although national legislation supports youth involvement, the assessment reveals that young people and CSOs—especially in municipalities like Kumanovo and Lipkovo—continue to face limited access to decision-making platforms and inadequate institutional backing. Gaps in policy-making expertise and advocacy skills further reduce their influence on policy outcomes. At the same time, current systems such as Local Youth Councils, youth centers, and local authorities that encourage community engagement present valuable opportunities for more meaningful participation.

To address these challenges, the report highlights four priority areas. First, targeted training is needed to build competency in policy engagement, advocacy, negotiation, and digital communication. Second, institutional reforms should simplify bureaucratic processes, formalize youth representation in advisory bodies, and guarantee reliable funding for youth-led initiatives. Third, collaboration among CSOs, local authorities, and youth representatives must be intensified through regular dialogue and feedback mechanisms. Lastly, policy alignment requires strict enforcement of legal mandates for youth consultation, broader integration of civic education, and efforts to overcome cultural barriers that discourage youth participation.

Looking ahead, these findings will direct upcoming PRECYOUS activities, including specialized training programs, advocacy campaigns, and policy reforms. Strategic collaboration with municipal authorities, national bodies, and international partners—especially in accordance with the EU Youth Strategy—will be essential for ensuring sustainable impact and enabling young people to play an active role in shaping their communities' future.



2. Introduction

2.1.1 Background of the PRECYOUS Project

PRECIOUS aims to prevent violent extremism and enhance social cohesion by engaging youth in positive, community-driven activities—particularly through sports—and by strengthening their involvement in policy-making processes. Under Work Package 4 (WP4), the project focuses on identifying and addressing the challenges that limit meaningful youth and CSO engagement in decision-making at local, regional, and national levels.

2.1.2 Context and Rationale for the Needs Assessment

Young people and CSOs play a crucial role in shaping democratic governance. However, in North Macedonia, historical marginalization, limited institutional support, and bureaucratic barriers have hindered their effective participation. This Needs Assessment seeks to clarify these barriers, identify capacity gaps, and propose evidence-based recommendations to enhance youth-led policy interventions. By aligning local needs with broader EU frameworks like the EU Youth Strategy and EU Youth Dialogue, PRECYOUS aims to foster a more inclusive, participatory environment conducive to sustainable development and democratic resilience.

2.1.3 Purpose and Objectives

- **The first objective** is to identify the structural, cultural, and political barriers that impede youth and CSO policy engagement.
- **The second objective** is to determine the specific training and resource requirements needed to bolster effective advocacy and policy-making involvement.
- **The third objective** is to align local challenges with EU-level strategies to ensure coherence with recognized policy frameworks.
- **The fourth objective** is to provide a clear roadmap for subsequent project activities, including training modules, collaborative policy initiatives, and advocacy strategies.



3. Methodology

This section outlines the data collection and analysis methods used to conduct the Needs Assessment. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating desk research, surveys, and focus group discussions to capture quantitative trends and qualitative insights.

3.1.1 Data Collection Approach

3.1.2 Desk Research

The research team reviewed a broad range of materials, including national and local policy documents such as the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies and the National Youth Strategy (2016–2025), as well as EU frameworks like the EU Youth Strategy and Youth Wiki reports. Academic and NGO studies were also examined to provide additional context. The analysis focused on the historical backdrop, institutional structures, youth policy implementation, and the challenges facing CSOs and youth in North Macedonia, with a particular emphasis on the municipalities of Kumanovo and Lipkovo.

3.1.3 Field Research

Surveys

Online and paper-based surveys were distributed to youth and CSO representatives, featuring both closed-ended and open-ended questions on barriers to participation, knowledge of policy processes, and capacity-building needs.

Focus Groups

In-depth discussions were conducted with youth leaders, CSO staff, and local authorities in Kumanovo and Lipkovo. Participants were selected to represent diverse backgrounds, including various ethnic groups, genders, and types of organizational involvement, ensuring a broad range of perspectives.

3.1.4 Qualitative and Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative Methods	Qualitative Methods
The surveys captured data on respondents' familiarity with policy-making, access to decision-making platforms, confidence in advocacy, and perceived institutional support. Frequency and percentage analyses were conducted to identify prevalent trends.	Focus group transcripts were thematically coded to identify recurrent issues such as bureaucratic hurdles, cultural norms, and youth disengagement. Common themes were triangulated with survey data and desk research findings to validate and enrich the analysis.

3.1.5 Survey Design

- **Topics Covered:**
 - **Barriers to Participation:** Presence or absence of youth councils, bureaucratic challenges, degree of institutional transparency.
 - **Knowledge of Policy-Making:** Awareness of formal mechanisms, policy cycles, and local governance structures.
 - **Advocacy and Influencing Skills:** Communication, lobbying, negotiation, and digital literacy.
 - **Capacity-Building Needs:** Desired training topics, availability of resources, and preferred learning formats.
- **Respondent Profile:**
 - **Youth:** Individuals aged 15–35 including students, unemployed youth, and active community members.
 - **CSO Representatives:** Staff from local NGOs, youth organizations, and advocacy groups.



3.1.6 Focus Group Methodology

- **Discussion Areas:**
 - **Personal Experiences:** Participants' motivations, successes, and frustrations in engaging with policy processes.
 - **Community Challenges:** Perceptions of local authorities, available infrastructure, and the influence of cultural norms.
 - **Opportunities for Change:** Suggestions for improving youth councils, local youth strategies, and bridging gaps with policymakers.
- **Composition:**
 - Each focus group included 8–12 participants, ensuring representation from diverse ethnic backgrounds and a balance of male/female perspectives.

3.1.7 Sampling and Participant Details

- **Sample Size:**
 - A total of 42 survey responses were collected, and four focus group discussions were conducted (two in Kumanovo and two in Lipkovo).
- **Demographics:**
 - Participants ranged in age from 16 to 35. Ethnic composition included Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Roma communities. CSOs represented a broad spectrum of areas, including youth development, community services, and cultural initiatives.



4. Current Legal and Policy Framework for Youth Participation

This section synthesizes the core aspects of the existing legal framework, local policy environment, and alignment with EU priorities.

4.1.1 Identification and Analysis of the Existing Legal Framework Related to Youth

North Macedonia has progressively introduced laws and policies to strengthen youth engagement:

- **Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020):** Mandates the creation of Local Youth Councils (LYCs), Youth Officers in municipalities, and budget allocations (0.1% minimum) for youth projects.
- **National Youth Strategy (2016–2025):** Outlines strategic goals for youth empowerment in education, employment, and civic participation.
- **Agency for Youth and Sports:** Tasked with implementing youth-related initiatives; however, funding and structural limitations impede its effectiveness.

Despite these legal instruments, local implementation remains inconsistent. The Agency for Youth and Sports often prioritizes sports over broader youth initiatives, resulting in marginal support for policy-focused youth programs.

4.1.2 Analysis of the Local Youth Strategy

In the North-East region, which includes **Kumanovo** and **Lipkovo**, application of national youth policies is uneven:

Kumanovo:	Lipkovo:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Has a Youth Office and the “MultiKulti” youth centre run by the Centre for Intercultural Dialogue (CID).○ Is in the process of forming a Local Youth Council but lacks a dedicated Local Youth Strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Appointed a Youth Officer only recently.○ Established a youth center in October 2023, also run by CID.○ Has yet to develop a formal Local Youth Strategy, resulting in weak institutional support and limited resources for youth engagement.



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4.1.3 Alignment with EU Priorities and Identified Gaps

The EU Youth Strategy emphasizes youth empowerment, quality employment, social inclusion, and participation in democratic life. While North Macedonia's legal and policy frameworks theoretically align with these EU priorities, significant gaps persist:

- **Policy Implementation:** Local authorities struggle to operationalize laws, leaving many youth initiatives unfunded or unsupported.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** EU calls for structured dialogue and evidence-based policy-making are not fully met, as there is limited monitoring and evaluation of youth programs at the municipal level.
- **Limited Awareness:** Both youth and CSOs are often unaware of how EU processes (e.g., the EU Youth Dialogue) can be leveraged to advance local priorities.

Bridging these gaps requires both institutional reforms and capacity-building for youth and CSOs, ensuring they can meaningfully engage in—and benefit from—EU-aligned frameworks.





5. Key Findings from the Field Research

Drawing on desk research, surveys, and focus group discussions, this section outlines the primary barriers, capacity-building needs, and potential opportunities for improving youth and CSO engagement in policy processes.

5.1 Barriers to Participation

5.1.1 Limited Access to Decision-Making Platforms

- **Insufficient Quotas and Outreach:** Although the Law on Youth Participation calls for youth representation in municipal bodies, many respondents cited limited or sporadic invitations to policy forums or consultations.
- **Bureaucratic Hurdles:** Complex administrative processes deter small CSOs from formalizing their engagement. Youth from marginalized backgrounds face additional hurdles due to language barriers and lack of documentation.
- **Political Affiliations:** Some CSOs and youth are sidelined if they are perceived to align with opposing political groups, inhibiting neutral and inclusive policy dialogue.
- **Unclear Pathways:** Survey data show that 47.6% of respondents feel they have some access to decision-making platforms, while 14.3% say they have no access at all. The remainder (38.1%) are uncertain of available pathways.

5.1.2 Lack of Knowledge About Policy-Making Processes

Minimal Institutional Support:

Focus groups revealed that few municipalities actively guide youth or CSOs through policy processes.

Gaps in Education & Mentorship:

Curricula rarely include civic education or governance, leaving youth unaware of avenues for participation.

Survey Results:

Although 33.3% of respondents claim they are “very familiar” with policy-making, the majority (57.1%) self-reported only partial understanding. This mismatch indicates a need for better resources and training.



5.1.3 Insufficient Advocacy and Influencing Skills

- **Lack of Technical Expertise:** Participants expressed difficulty in lobbying, negotiating, and formulating concrete policy demands.
- **Digital & Media Literacy:** Online platforms are powerful advocacy tools, yet many CSOs and youth lack training on how to leverage social media to influence public discourse.
- **Confidence Levels:** Only 33.3% feel “very confident” engaging in advocacy, while 14.3% explicitly identified as “not confident.”

5.1.4 Political, Cultural, and Logistical Barriers

- **Cultural Norms:** Traditional attitudes may dissuade youth—especially women and ethnic minorities—from actively engaging in governance.
- **Discontinuity of Engagement:** Youth often experience tokenistic inclusion. Once a consultation ends, there is no mechanism to ensure continued participation or accountability.
- **Financial Constraints:** Limited budgets restrict youth-led programs, and reliance on inconsistent donor funding hampers strategic advocacy efforts.
- **Ethnic Divisions:** Municipalities like Lipkovo and Kumanovo are ethnically diverse, which can sometimes lead to fragmentation and reduced collective action.



6. Capacity-Building Needs

6.1.1 Training on Policy Engagement, Negotiation, and Advocacy

- **Workshop Demand:** Many respondents favored structured workshops covering policy analysis, public speaking, negotiation tactics, and EU frameworks.
- **Mentorship & Peer Learning:** Focus group participants repeatedly mentioned the need for ongoing mentorship from seasoned policymakers or CSO leaders.

6.1.2 Tools for Better Understanding of Policy Frameworks

- **User-Friendly Guides:** Participants requested succinct materials explaining local, national, and EU policy processes.
- **Interactive Platforms:** Online portals or mobile apps could democratize access to legislative updates and consultation schedules.

6.1.3 Platforms & Networks for Improved Communication with Policymakers

- **Dedicated Forums:** Establishing regular roundtables or youth advisory boards to provide sustained dialogue between young people, CSOs, and municipal authorities.
- **Strengthening CSO Coalitions:** Encouraging collaboration among diverse organizations can unify advocacy efforts, amplifying their collective impact.

6.1.4 Opportunities for Improvement

In light of the barriers and challenges identified, there are several ways to strengthen youth and CSO engagement in local decision-making processes. Building on existing structures while introducing innovative approaches can create more inclusive and participatory opportunities for young people. Key areas for improvement include formalizing youth participation channels, enhancing coordination among stakeholders, and leveraging digital spaces for advocacy.



6.1.5 Existing Platforms for Youth and CSO Engagement

- **Local Youth Councils & Youth Centers:** Kumanovo and Lipkovo both have or are in the process of establishing youth structures (e.g., the “MultiKulti” center, local youth offices). These can be leveraged to formalize participation and sustain youth activities.
- **Digital Advocacy:** Social media remains an untapped but promising space for policy dialogue, especially for younger demographics.

6.1.6 Motivated Stakeholders Willing to Increase Participation

- **Local Authorities’ Interest:** Some municipal officials have shown receptiveness to youth inputs, provided they receive training and resources to integrate such feedback.
- **Wider Community Support:** Focus groups uncovered a readiness among local communities to see youth more involved, particularly in addressing social issues like migration, unemployment, and social cohesion.

6.1.7 Concrete Steps for More Inclusive Policy-Making

- **Legal Mandates & Policy Reforms:** Ensuring municipalities adhere to the 0.1% budget allocation for youth activities, and formalizing the role of youth representatives in local governance.
- **Enhanced Collaboration Mechanisms:** Establishing standing committees or joint task forces that include youth, CSOs, and local decision-makers.
- **Inclusive Civic Education:** Introducing or expanding civic education curricula to foster early interest and competency in governance.





7. Conclusions & Recommendations

This section provides an overview of the main findings, outlines future actions under the PRECIOUS project, and presents actionable recommendations to enhance youth and CSO engagement in local policy-making.

7.1.1 Summary of Key Findings

- **Multiple Barriers:** Bureaucracy, limited institutional support, and cultural norms significantly hinder youth participation.
- **Knowledge & Skills Gaps:** A substantial segment of young people and CSO staff lack the advocacy expertise required to shape policy effectively.
- **Promising Platforms:** Entities like youth centers, Local Youth Councils, and digital forums provide a baseline for engagement but require further support to realize their potential.
- **Alignment with EU Priorities:** Although national legislation generally aligns with EU policy frameworks, practical implementation at the municipal level remains inconsistent.

7.1.2 Future Steps

Within the PRECIOUS project, these findings will inform several targeted initiatives:

- **Training Modules:** Design advocacy and policy engagement workshops, including sessions on digital literacy for online campaigning.
- **Local Advocacy Campaigns:** Pilot initiatives that enable youth and CSOs to work directly with local policymakers, ensuring an ongoing feedback loop for inclusive governance.
- **Policy Interventions:** Collaborate with municipalities to refine or develop Local Youth Strategies, emphasizing accountability, transparency, and community participation.



7.1.3 Summary of Recommendations

The following recommendations address the identified barriers and aim to strengthen youth and CSO roles in policy-making. They are organized by main thematic areas and distinguish between short-term and long-term actions.

A. Training & Capacity-Building Programs

Short-Term (3–6 Months)

- **Develop** and deliver workshops on advocacy, negotiation, and public speaking.
- **Introduce** peer mentorship programs linking experienced CSO leaders with emerging youth advocates.

Long-Term (6–12 Months and Beyond)

- **Establish** continuous education modules in schools and universities focusing on civic engagement and policy processes.
- **Offer** advanced training on EU frameworks, funding opportunities, and strategic policy analysis.

B. Improved Access to Platforms

Short-Term

- **Facilitate** open forums or “town hall” meetings where youth and CSOs can interact directly with local authorities.
- **Formalize** the structure of youth councils, ensuring a clear mandate and adequate funding.

Long-Term

- **Institutionalize** quotas or reserved seats for youth in municipal decision-making bodies.
- **Develop** digital platforms for real-time feedback and consultations on policy proposals.

C. Strengthening Collaboration with Local Authorities

Short-Term

- **Reactivate** or strengthen the role of municipal youth officers, especially in Lipkovo, ensuring they receive adequate training and resources.
- **Encourage** local authorities to systematically consult CSOs during budget planning and policy formulation.

Long-Term

- **Create** permanent liaison bodies or committees where CSOs and youth representatives sit alongside government officials.
- **Collaborate** on multi-year projects addressing community-specific challenges, such as interethnic cooperation or youth employment.



D. Policy Recommendations

Short-Term	Long-Term
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Enforce the legal mandate that municipalities allocate at least 0.1% of their budgets to youth programs.○ Simplify administrative procedures for CSOs—especially smaller, grassroots organizations—to register and report activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Mainstream civic education across educational institutions to foster consistent engagement in policy processes from an early age.○ Adopt inclusive local youth strategies aligned with EU priorities, ensuring coherence with the EU Youth Dialogue and EU Youth Strategy.

Overall Conclusion

The Needs Assessment highlights a persistent gap between legislative intent and actual practice in youth participation across North Macedonia. While the existing legal framework provides entry points for greater youth influence, limited resources, knowledge deficits, and cultural constraints continue to slow progress. Nonetheless, the presence of motivated CSOs, youth advocates, and supportive local officials offers a foundation for more inclusive governance and social cohesion.

By implementing these recommendations through the IPA-supported PRECIOUS framework, stakeholders can enhance the legitimacy and resilience of local governance structures, strengthen youth involvement, and align efforts with broader EU objectives. This multifaceted approach will not only reduce risks of social fragmentation but also foster democratic values and sustainable development in North Macedonia.

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