POLITICAL THOUGHT

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POLITICAL THOUGHT

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LOST IN REELS AND RAGE?
THE RACE BETWEEN PARTIES FOR TIKTOK PRESENCE

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Does TikTok decide elections in Germany? Local empirical researchers sometimes deny this — usually pointing to the small share of first-time and young voters within the overall electorate. Nevertheless, concerns about the influence of major platforms on the young generation are growing. After all, in the 2025 federal election, this group predominantly voted for parties at the political fringes. On 23 February 2025, 25 % of 18- to 24-year-olds voted for the party Die Linke, 21 % of the vote in this age group went to the AfD, placing it in second place, and six percent voted for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), founded only in 2024.

Number of Likes in Millions

Party	Followers (thousands)	Likes (millions)
CDU (@insideCDU)	88,5	2,0
CDU-parliamentary group (@cducsu)	30,0	0,4
AfD-parliamentary group (@afdfraktionimbundestag)	630,0	11,6
SPD (@deineSPD)	88,0	2,3
SPD-parliamentary group (@spdbt)	173,6	3,2
Die Grünen (@diegruenen)	81,0	1,7
Die Grünen-parliamentary group (@gruenebundestag)	30,5	0,425
Die Linke (@die. linke)	408,0	9,9

Number of Followers in Thousands

■ Likes ■ Followers
Source: TikTok, 26.08.2025

Aside from the fact that the voting behavior of the youngest and young voters casts a shadow over hopes for a positive development of democracy, the political influence of Generation Z — namely, voters aged 18 to 24 — should not be underestimated. Around 4.1 million of the total 60.5 million eligible voters belong to this group; this corresponds to roughly seven percent. If these seven percent had not predominantly voted for parties at the political fringes, the two-thirds majority of the centrist parties in the Bundestag might not have been lost. In the 2021 federal election, the Greens achieved the strongest result among young voters with 23 % (2025: 10 %), while the FDP reached 21 % (2025: 5 %).

Debates about the influence of social media on elections are not new. As early as 2016, Der Spiegel described Facebook as an "opinion-shaping and potentially manipulative

machine." Years later, TikTok has moved to the center of this debate, even though with an estimated 1.6 billion users worldwide it is "only" the third-largest social network — behind Facebook (three billion) and Instagram (two billion). However, young people in particular are highly active on digital platforms: In Germany, 99.5 % of 18 - to 25-year-olds use social media, with 91.5 % using it daily. TikTok has some 22 to 25 million monthly active users in Germany. Although the platform ranks only third nationally, the usage intensity is exceptionally high: TikTok users in Germany spend an average of 35 hours per month on the platform and open the app about ten times daily on Android devices. Only WhatsApp is opened more frequently, at eighteen times a day.

TikTok reflects the communication needs of Generation Z: The platform entertains, it relieves boredom, it informs. When it comes to political content — which generally performs poorly on social media — a perception has taken hold that parties at the political fringes operate especially successfully on TikTok and effectively bring their questionable messages to young people. Following such criticism, conspicuous accounts such as that of AfD politician Maximilian Krah were restricted or deleted by TikTok during the 2024 European election campaign.

A HEAD START FOR THE FRINGES

A look at the party accounts confirms such a "ranking": The AfD (@afdfraktionimbundestag) has 630,000 followers and 11.6 million likes, Die Linke (@die.linke) nearly 410,000 followers and 9.9 million likes. The CDU (@insideCDU), with around 88,000 followers and two million likes, performs considerably worse. The parliamentary group account @cducsu has around 30,000 followers and 400,000 likes. The SPD (@deineSPD) also reaches 88,000 followers and 2.3 million likes, supplemented by the parliamentary group account (@spdbt) with 170,000 followers and 3.2 million likes. The Greens (@diegruenen) have 80,000 followers, while their parliamentary group account (@gruenebundestag) has around 30,000 (as of 26 August 2025).

These figures show: Although the centrist parties maintain their own channels and perform roughly equally relative to each other, they clearly lag behind the parties at the fringes when it comes to the classic TikTok metrics — followers and likes. It is likely more than coincidence that these metrics correlate — in percentage terms — with the voting decisions of 18 - to 24-year-olds in the last federal election: Die Linke 25 %, AfD 21 %, CDU 13 %, SPD 12 %, Greens 10 %.

The reason parties at the political fringes reach more people on TikTok is only partly due to their sharp, polarizing content. Their posts also always aim at interaction — and

interaction is rewarded by the algorithm. These parties embraced TikTok early and built professional infrastructures. AfD chairwoman Alice Weidel has been active on the platform since August 2021. Her parliamentary group published its first Bundestag post on 27 January 2022.

The CDU began with individual initiatives, such as that of Uwe Dorendorf in Lower Saxony, whose account has been active since March 2021. The first post from @ CDUDeutschland dates from 26 February 2024. The SPD launched its TikTok activities only a few weeks earlier, in January 2024. By the 2025 federal election campaign, virtually all parties were active on TikTok.

Olaf Scholz achieved viral hits under @TeamBundeskanzler starting in April 2024. His briefcase, however, became less a carrier of political messages and more a widely shared running gag. Other accounts also achieved considerable reach, including @ teammerz2025 with over 22,000 followers. Professionally produced content was posted that provided substantial campaign support — but the account has been inactive since 23 February 2025.

The reactions to these social media campaigns varied. The AfD used early its advantage — involving politicians at all levels and support by micro-influencers who deliberately spread party-aligned content. These were often smaller accounts with a few thousand to tens of thousands of followers, which are particularly credible within specific online communities and function as digital amplifiers. Self-reinforcing echo chambers were already present and increased the impact further. An active and already "trained" community provided the party with significant reach through comments, likes, and shared content. Simple slogans like "Sei schlau, wähl blau (Be smart, vote blue)" circulated even in schoolyards — something that would never have been achieved through linear media like television or radio.

DIGITAL PRE-POLITICAL SPACES

The same applies to Heidi Reichinnek's call "Auf die Barrikaden (To the barricades)" which mobilized supporters in her party's final election sprint. With 620,000 followers, Reichinnek became a TikTok "heavyweight." For comparison: @Larsklingbeil has 29,600, @roberthabeck has 107,000, @markus.soeder has 283,000 and @merzcdu has 185,000 followers. Reichinnek is exceeded only by @alice_weidel_afd with 977,000 followers (as of 26 August 2025).

Politicians at the fringes are thus far more successful on social media than those in the center. For example, the AfD state politician Ulrich Siegmund (@mutzurwahrheit90) has over 563,000 followers. But there is no reason for defeatism — not due to the belief that polarizing messaging gives the fringes an insurmountable advantage. Even the political TikTok "heavyweights" still lag far behind the largest entertainment, sports, and lifestyle accounts in Germany: Football star Toni Kroos reaches 12.2 million followers, volleyball player Tobias Krick 5.6 million, and track-and-field athlete Alica Schmidt 2.2 million. This shows that popularity and professional presentation are what make accounts successful. Thus, for the centrist parties, it is not only about increasing their digital engagement; it is above all about improving the tone, aesthetics, and format of their digital offerings.

The parties at the fringes use the platform to create a counter-public to established media. Moreover, online platforms provide access to a new type of digital pre-political space. In such spaces, politically relevant content can reach large audiences without being distributed through official party channels. In this context, third-party accounts — "political front fields" — are becoming increasingly important for digital opinion-shaping. These accounts often appear unrelated to any party and seem non-political at first glance, yet they convey party-aligned messages. This is true of TikTok formats like "TradWives," or fitness influencers and tattooed models who post simple political slogans to catchy music. Such content succeeds in the algorithm, reaches large audiences, and connects with users far beyond the political base. These posts also appear in everyday feeds, spread on schoolyards, and — as seen with the notorious "Sylt videos" featuring xenophobic refrains — clearly resonate even among middle-class audiences.

CDU-CRITICAL CLIMATE ON INSTAGRAM

SPD and Green Party accounts benefit far more on Instagram — the platform for the "slightly older" — from prominent supporters with large followings than the CDU does. Long-time SPD member Marie von den Benken (@regendelfin, 221,000 followers) regularly shares political content alongside fashion and celebrity updates. Gianna Bacio (@giannabacio, 134,000 followers), sex educator and podcaster, publicly joined the Greens during the election campaign and urged her followers to engage in more "good" political activism.

Instagram currently hosts a CDU-critical climate — from both the left and the right. A well-functioning Christian-democratic "front field" or influential third-party accounts either do not exist or achieve little reach and engagement. The prevailing dismissive

stance toward CDU positions makes it difficult for the party to gain traction in this digital space. A striking example was the account @frauen.gegen.merz with 116,000 followers, compared to @Frauenfürmerz with only 1,910. The only well-functioning CDU-aligned third-party account is @merzrevolution with 96,000 followers.

Right-wing actors use TikTok not only as a stage for provocative memes, parodies, and sharp short-form content, but also as a platform for one-sided information. Content from centrist parties and their networks must pay closer attention to "cultural fit," since TikTok rewards authenticity, pace, and populist simplification. Instagram, by contrast, currently follows a different aesthetic: lifestyle, visual gloss, and a moral subtext that aligns well with progressive narratives. Its audience is older, more urban, and often academically oriented — and mostly left of center.

"FLOODING" PLATFORMS
WITH INTELLIGENT CONTENT

The world of young people today revolves around the smartphone. Information, entertainment, social connection — everything flows through the device, anytime and anywhere. And TikTok is always there. The platform sets topics and trends that traditional media pick up only afterward. The influence of this and future platforms continues to grow, with potentially tangible effects on elections. Anyone who does not want to lose media access to younger generations must adapt to these changing conditions.

Understanding how to optimally use platforms and mobilize followers is crucial. Followers of parties at the fringes are already trained to comment angrily or share enthusiastically at the right moment. Centrist parties do not yet have comparably "deployable" communities.

TikTok operates through emotional appeal and sharp messaging. That centrist parties struggle more with this is, at first glance, commendable. All the more, they must find creative ways to overcome this barrier. Although understanding of platform-specific communication has grown, the task remains to master the language of a "counter-medium."

The importance of the 9:16 vertical format, suited to smartphones, is now acknowledged. Online editorial teams have been created or expanded. But professional party and politician accounts alone are not enough to achieve impact on TikTok. The platform must be actively "flooded" with intelligent content. A new political "front field"

requires third-party accounts, consistently engaged digital supporters, amplifying influencers, and coordinated campaigns.

However, TikTok does not mark the end of political communication. Anyone who focuses solely on TikTok and ignores the "next platform" risks falling behind. Nor should the "old" platforms — Instagram, YouTube, or even Facebook — be neglected; they must be filled with appropriate, authentic content to reach the full range of target groups.

Finally, with the rise of AI-generated content, distinguishing authenticity, manipulation, and targeted disinformation becomes even harder. This makes it all the more important for parties at the center of the political spectrum to establish an early, credible, and creative presence in both old and new digital spaces, before other political forces occupy them. This race has long begun and is becoming increasingly decisive for the outcome of elections.

SHORT BIOGRAPHYES

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Aleksandra Jovevska Gjorgjevik
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LOCAL ELECTIONS 2025: SILENT MESSAGE, EMPTY BALLOTS, AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE ETERNAL PARTY BASTIONS

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The 2025 local elections were held in a period of heightened political sensitivity, in which the electoral process in itself became just as important as the political actors participating in it. Frequent and late amendments to the electoral legislation, especially those concerning the requirements for independent candidates and media representation, created an atmosphere of unpredictability that directly affected perceptions of a fair and inclusive electoral competition.

The decline in voter turnout and the growing number of invalid ballots further indicate that some voters are experiencing fatigue, distrust, or a protest mood. At the same time, the local results revealed significant shifts: changes in traditional political strongholds, increasing influence of independent candidates, and new relations among political actors.

This analysis seeks to explain why these elections differ from previous ones—both local and parliamentary—and how changes in the rules, voter behaviour, and local political dynamics produced different electoral outcomes. Thus, the 2025 elections are treated as an important indicator of the deeper direction in which local democracy in the country is moving.

1. AMENDMENTS TO THE ELECTORAL LEGISLATION AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE 2025 LOCAL ELECTIONS

The 2025 local elections took place under conditions in which the electoral legislation was just as significant as the candidates themselves and their campaigns. Unlike previous cycles, where amendments to the Electoral Code served mainly as technical adjustments, in 2025 they had the potential to directly shape the electoral offer, the fairness of the race, and the degree of political inclusiveness. Several substantial changes were adopted regarding campaign financing, media representation, electoral administration, and voting rights, as well as the segment that drew the most political attention— the conditions for the participation of independent candidates.

In addition to the formal objective to improve the integrity of the electoral process, the amendments to the regulatory electoral framework carried the potential to favour structurally stronger parties and restrict political competition. The legal vacuum created just before the elections concerning the rules for independent candidates' participation, the administrative barriers, and the unbalanced media coverage reinforced the perception that the elections did not ensure equal access to the political arena.

The provisions of the Electoral Code that required 1,000 signatures to submit independent candidate lists were amended, introducing instead a requirement of support from 1% of registered voters in the specific electoral district. These amendments were annulled by the Constitutional Court, leaving a partial legal vacuum at a critical moment shortly before the elections. The process then returned to Parliament, where the proposal to reduce the threshold for independent candidates from 1% to 0.5% remained unfinished because it did not receive the required Badinter majority. On 17 of August 2025, the State Election Commission (SEC) filled this legal gap by adopting a new Rulebook, which set the requirement for independent lists and mayoral candidates at signatures of only two citizen. This prolonged legal uncertainty, coupled with the fact that until the very last moment it remained unclear whether and under what conditions independent candidates would be allowed to participate. It led some of them to begin forming political parties, before the issue was abruptly resolved by introducing a requirement of only two signatures shortly before the elections. This created an atmosphere that was particularly discouraging for independent initiatives, as public perception was that the uncertainty surrounding the rules discouraged independent candidates and shifted the focus and advantage toward already established political parties. Despite these obstacles, the 2025 elections recorded a historically high number of independent initiatives: 69 for mayoral candidates and 68 for councilor lists.

In this election cycle as well, the rule continues that from the day elections are announced until the start of the campaign, paid political advertising on traditional and online media is prohibited. The sole exception are the announcements for collecting signatures for independent candidacies, which must be broadcast within designated advertising blocks. The amendments of March 2024 further narrow the space for early promotion, allowing only one public event per participant between the confirmation of the lists and the start of the campaign, and prohibiting the spending of campaign funds during this period. During the campaign, the media may broadcast nine and a half minutes of political advertising per real hour, allocated according to the size of the parties, which substantially favours the largest ones, while smaller actors struggle to secure meaningful media visibility. Additional controversy emerged due to ambiguities in the Electoral Code, which resulted in Levica and ZNAM—although both are parliamentary parties with more than five MPs and their own parliamentary groups— being denied the right to paid political advertising on television. Paradoxically, parties with a smaller number of MPs obtained the right to media space, because the category of parties with at least six MPs is not defined in the law. The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services clarified that the guidelines were drafted in accordance with the strict legal framework and in consultation with the institutions responsible for the

electoral process, but that corrections are impossible without amending the Electoral Code itself. Although formally designed to ensure fair conditions and controlled spending, these rules in practice create inequality among participants. Limited media access, strict timeframes, and legislative gaps contribute to the structural advantage of large parties, while independent candidates, smaller political actors, and new parties face significantly restricted opportunities to reach the public—negatively affecting pluralism and the competitiveness of the electoral process.

2. DECLINING TURNOUT: VOTER DEMOBILIZATION AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Voter turnout in the 2025 local elections shows a clear downward trend from 2017 to 2025, indicating a growing apathy among the electorate. While local elections traditionally have higher turnout than parliamentary elections, the last three cycles demonstrate that mobilizing voters is becoming increasingly difficult, especially in larger urban centres. In 2017, turnout was the highest of the three local election cycles, partly explained by the political moment of the change of government and the heightened political energy following the two-year political crisis. In the 2021 local elections, turnout declined, a trend also observed in the 2020 and 2024 parliamentary elections. In 2025, turnout reached its lowest level in many municipalities, including the City of Skopje

Turnout by election round (percentage)
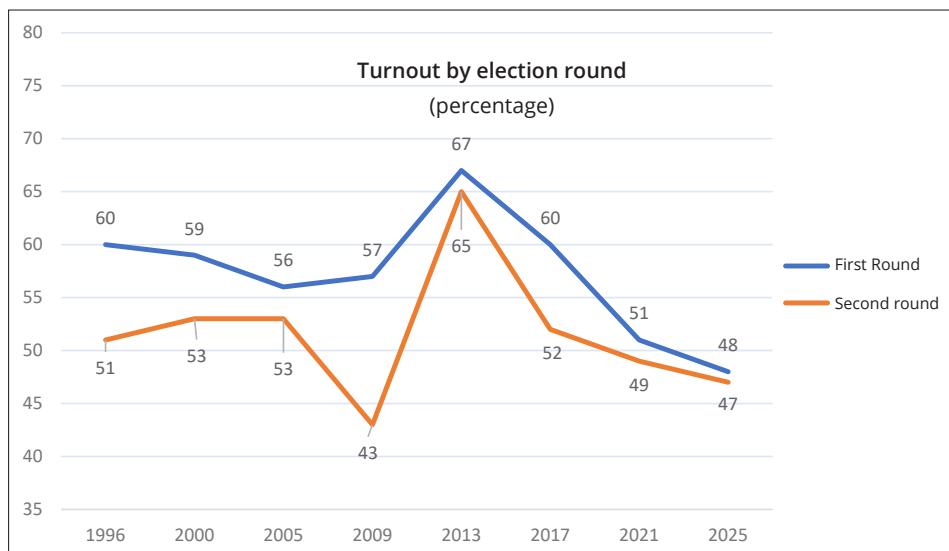
The reasons for this declining turnout trend stem from a combination of political fatigue, low trust in institutions, and changes in the structure of the electoral offer. The prolonged and intense political confrontation has created a sense of saturation and the belief that an individual vote has limited influence, which reduces motivation to participate. This situation is further reinforced by the relatively low level of trust citizens have in institutions. Finally, although these elections featured a broader political offer and more independent initiatives, their real effect on mobilization was limited because many of those candidates did not receive sufficient visibility or equal campaigning conditions. Until the very last moment, it was uncertain how the amendments to the electoral legislation would be implemented, creating confusion and insecurity regarding the participation of independent candidates, while their appearance without logos on the ballots further reduced their recognizability. Instead of stimulating mobilization, this uneven practical setup strengthened the impression that the electoral offer was poorly differentiated and insufficiently visible, which for some voters contributed to a sense of apathy and abstention.

However, if we consider turnout in local elections across several regions of the country, different dynamics can be observed. The Skopje region is the best example of a dramatic decline in voter mobilization. Turnout in the City of Skopje—48.9% in the first round (2025) and only 35.3% in the second round—is among the lowest recorded so far. This trend is not new; urban municipalities such as Karpoš, Centar, Aerodrom, and Kisela Voda already showed a decline in turnout in 2021, but in 2025 it became even more evident. A key characteristic is that Skopje has a constant increase in the number of invalid ballots, which points to protest voting and rejection of the offered choices rather than complete apathy. Additionally, the rise of non-partisan movements and independent candidates has fragmented the voter base.

The Eastern region traditionally has higher turnout and more stable political patterns. In most of these municipalities, turnout shows only small fluctuations, with a slight decline from 2017 to 2021 and relative stabilization in 2025. Here, the dominance of VMRO–DPMNE creates a stronger identity element and higher mobilization. It is characteristic that the percentage of invalid ballots is lower, indicating clear electoral positions and possibly stronger party discipline.

A decline in turnout is also observed in Southwestern Macedonia and Pelagonija, especially in the urban parts of these regions. Nearly all municipalities in this area experienced changes in local governments over the last three local election cycles, which was reflected in shifts of power at central level in the subsequent parliamentary elections. Thus, these two regions often serve as a good indicator of broader

parliamentary trends, as early changes in voter sentiment and rotations between governing and opposition parties are most clearly seen there.

In the Polog and Northeastern regions, turnout is significantly influenced by the dynamics within the so-called Albanian political bloc. Most municipalities in this area record a turnout decline across all three cycles, although with varying intensity. Competition among the parties within the Albanian bloc, along with some independent lists, creates a highly fragmented political landscape, particularly in the larger urban centers of the region, contributing to weaker mobilization. In some municipalities, such as Tetovo and Gostivar in 2025, the number of invalid ballots is noticeably higher, indicating fatigue with inter-party conflicts and a possible decline in trust in local political elites.

3. INVALID BALLOTS: A QUIET PROTEST AGAINST THE ELECTORAL OFFER

In addition to the fact that a majority of voters chose not to exercise their voting right, these elections also recorded a historic number of invalid ballots—both for the election of mayors and for municipal council representatives. According to the Election Commission, in the first round of the mayoral elections, out of a total of 885,085 votes, 53,724 or 6.1 percent were invalid. This means that nearly every seventeenth citizen's vote was invalid. Proportionally, the number of invalid ballots in 2025 is significantly higher compared to the 2021 elections (2.09 percent) and the 2017 elections (4.3 percent). A nearly identical pattern was observed in the second round: out of 345,584 voters who cast their ballots, 19,285 or 5.58 percent were invalid.

Analysing all previous election cycles, almost all show a trend of decreasing percentages of invalid ballots in the second round—most likely due to simplified ballots and greater voter awareness of the importance of the second-round choice. Unlike in 2017, when the drop between the two rounds was substantial (-33 percent), in 2021 we observed a decrease of 8.6 percent. In the 2025 elections, the percentage of invalid ballots dropped by only 7.9 percent—from 6.06 percent in the first round to 5.58 percent in the second.

Invalid ballots per election round
(percentage)
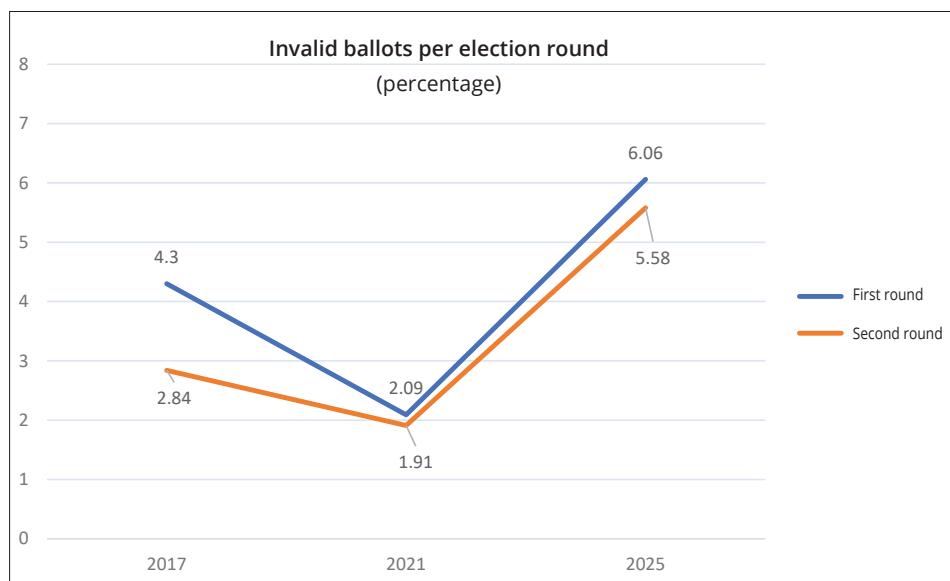
Among the Skopje municipalities and the City of Skopje, only the municipality of Shuto Orizari recorded a significant decrease in the percentage of invalid ballots—from a high 15.6 percent in the first round to 4.6 percent in the second. In all other municipalities where a second round was held—Karpoš, Centar, Aerodrom, and the City of Skopje—an increase is observed, with the percentage of invalid ballots in some cases nearly doubling. For example, in Aerodrom, the share of invalid ballots rises from 7.4 to nearly 11 percent in the second round; in Karpoš from 4.9 to almost 10 percent; and in Centar from 6.8 to 9 percent. Even in the mayoral election for the City of Skopje, the percentage of invalid ballots increased from 5.3 to 6.2 percent. This indicates that simplifying the ballot and narrowing the electoral offer does not reduce—but in fact increases—the number of invalid ballots.

Some authors, such as Power and Garand[1], examine how various societal factors influence the high number of invalid ballots in elections. According to them, there are three theoretical approaches through which the reasons for a large number of invalid ballots can be analysed: 1) the institutional approach, 2) the socioeconomic approach, and 3) the political-protest approach.

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1   Power, Timothy J., and James C. Garand. "Determinants of Invalid Voting in Latin America." *Electoral Studies* **26**, no. 2 (2007): 432–44.

Invalid ballots per municipality
(percentage)

	City of Skopje	Aerodrom	Karposh	Centar	Shuto Orizari
First round	5.3	7.4	4.9	6.8	15.6
Second round	6.2	10.5	9.9	9	4.6

■ First round   ■ Second round
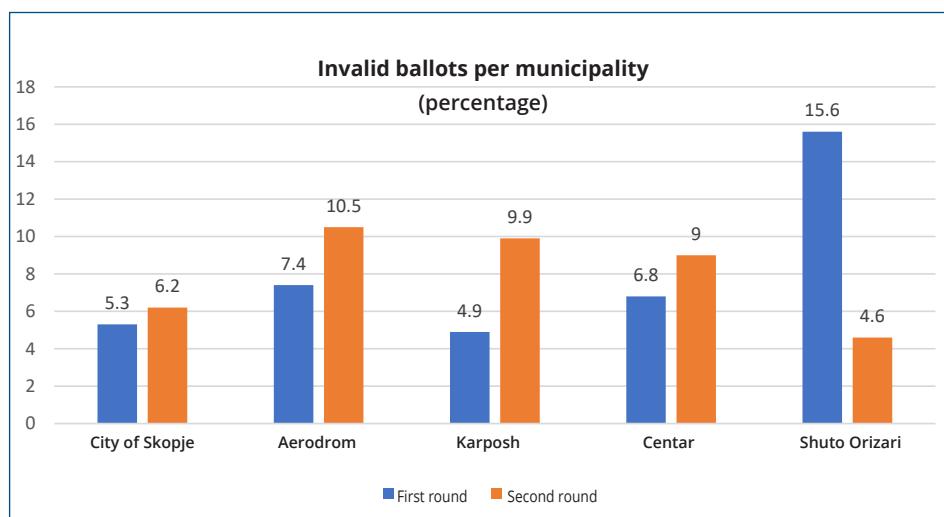
The institutional approach argues that electoral design (rules, vote-counting procedures, the breadth of the electoral offer, and the complexity of the ballot) in certain cases makes voting more difficult for the electorate, resulting in a large number of invalid ballots. The Electoral Code in North Macedonia provides that the ballot must be marked with a circle around the ordinal number of the candidate as the only valid mark, but at the same time states that a ballot should be considered valid if the voter's will can be clearly and unambiguously determined— which is, in fact, international practice. International observer missions of the OSCE and ODIHR, in 2017 and 2021, noted numerous cases where election boards invalidated ballots even though the voter's will was clearly identifiable. Additionally, the Code does not provide for a replacement ballot in cases where the voter unintentionally spoils the ballot. All this indicates an excessively strict interpretation of electoral rules which, combined with low voter awareness and education, creates an institutionally generated risk of a high percentage of invalid ballots.

The socioeconomic approach claims that blank or invalid ballots are a product of social structure; that is, the level of education, literacy, and access to information among the population strongly influences the prevalence of spoiled votes in elections. From this perspective, the increase in invalid ballots can be explained by structural problems in the education system and the literacy of the electorate. According to data from the 2021 census[2], more than 23,000 people in North Macedonia have no formal education,

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2   Sinisa Jakov. "North Macedonia's Population Poorly Educated, Census Data Show." *Balkan Insight*, June 2, 2022

over 62,000 have not completed primary school, and as many as 423,000 citizens have completed only primary education. Additionally, the latest PISA 2022 results[3] raise alarms about the continuous decline in the performance of Macedonian high school students in reading, mathematics, and science, with 74 percent scoring below the minimum literacy level in reading, and similar trends observed in the other two areas. Some studies also indicate low effectiveness of formal and non-formal civic education, leading to limited civic awareness and active participation in political processes.[4] Furthermore, economic insecurity and increasing social pressures may influence voters to approach elections with significantly reduced interest, which may result in insufficient information about electoral processes or the electoral offer, viewing voting merely as a civic formality.

The third, ***political-protest approach*** argues that invalid voting is a sign of revolt or protest. This dissatisfaction is most often a reflection of poor economic conditions, disapproval of the electoral offer, discontent with the current political regime, or a combination of all three factors. In recent years, the Macedonian public has witnessed countless scandals involving nearly all political parties and current electoral actors. The major tragedy in Kochani particularly exposed corruption within institutions, especially at the local level, and the mass protests that followed further illustrated the anger and disappointment of citizens toward all political structures in the country. In such a context and electoral atmosphere, many citizens consciously spoil their ballots—not abstaining from the electoral process but using it as a symbolic act of protest and as a way to send a message to political actors.

In summary, the growing number of invalid ballots in the country's elections can be seen as a combination of institutional, socioeconomic, and political-protest factors. The strict interpretation of electoral rules during vote counting, weak civic education and awareness, economic insecurity, and disappointment with political actors create conditions in which the electorate often uses invalid voting as a way to express distrust or protest toward politics. These negative figures and trends reflect the urgent need for reform of the electoral system, as well as the need to restore the electorate's trust in the electoral processes of the state.

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3   World Bank, *North Macedonia Policy Notes*. Washington, DC: The World Bank Group, September 2024

4   IFES, *Извештај за граѓанско образование и образование на гласачи во Северна Македонија* (Skopje: IFES, 2023)

LOCAL DYNAMICS AND SHIFTS ON THE GROUND: THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL POLITICAL STRONGHOLDS

This year, the local elections brought several interesting changes to the political map of the country. Some municipalities that were previously considered traditional bases of certain political parties shifted into the hands of their political opponents. Among them are the municipalities of Strumica, Struga, Kičevo, Debar, Saraj, and Čaška.

The change of local government in the Municipality of Strumica after two decades, which was regarded as a traditional stronghold of the Social Democratic Union, can be interpreted as the result of several factors. Among them, the increased popularity of VMRO-DPMNE at national level played a significant role, as did the decision of the SDSM leadership not to nominate the incumbent mayor of Strumica, Kostadin Kostadinov. This likely affected the motivation of Kostadinov's loyal supporters to back SDSM and shows that intra-party decisions and the personal popularity of candidates always have a considerable impact on the distribution of votes and the final election outcome.

In the Municipality of Struga, after 20 years in power, the Democratic Union for Integration and the incumbent mayor, Ramiz Merko, lost local control. The victory of the independent candidate, Mendi Ćura, can be viewed as the result of several factors. His independent candidacy positioned him as an alternative to the long-standing party structure, while his business success and reputation as a successful entrepreneur presented him as a competent and trustworthy figure in the eyes of the electorate. Additionally, support from the business community and the VLEN coalition helped secure greater legitimacy and resources. The shift in the voting outcome can be interpreted as a reaction of the electorate to the long-term governance of the same political structure and as a message signalling the need for a new approach to local governance in Struga.

A similar dynamic was observed in the Municipality of Kičevo, where after three terms in office, the incumbent mayor Fatmir Dehari and DUI lost local power, and Dr. Aleksandar Jovanovski from VMRO-DPMNE was elected as the new mayor. As in the previous cases, the popularity of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE and the local population's dissatisfaction with the long-term dominance of the same political group undoubtedly played a major role. Additionally, considering the demographic structure of Kičevo, Jovanovski, a respected physician with close family ties to the Albanian community, achieved broad acceptance among voters of all ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, numerous scandals involving the incumbent mayor Dehari, widely circulated on

social media before the elections, certainly contributed to a decline in his rating and influenced the final electoral result. Some media outlets and analysts presented the victory as a symbol of good interethnic coexistence in the Municipality of Kičevo, but the election results primarily reflect the coalition support of VLEN for its governing partner, as well as the consolidated support from other Macedonian parties, which—despite differing political views—directed their backing toward the Macedonian candidate

A significant redistribution of local power also occurred in several other municipalities, including Karpoš, Debar, Saraj, and Čaška. In the Municipality of Karpoš, one of the key municipalities in Skopje, VMRO-DPMNE, with Sotir Lukrovski, narrowly succeeded in taking over local government after decades of administration by GROM and SDSM, further consolidating the party's position in the larger part of Skopje. In the Municipality of Saraj, which had been a stable stronghold of DUI since 2009, the mayoral position passed to the VLEN candidate, Muhamet Elmazi, despite DUI winning more council seats. This development indicates a change in local political dynamics and the growing influence of VLEN, even in municipalities long considered impenetrable. In Debar, the VLEN candidate, Fisnik Mela, ended DUI's two-decade-long dominance, reflecting VLEN's popularity among the Albanian electorate, including in smaller municipalities in the western part of the country. In the Municipality of Čaška, for the first time, a mayor from DUI was elected. Although part of the public presented this outcome as a major victory for the Albanian political bloc, the results primarily reflect the consolidation of Albanian votes and support from other ethnic communities, combined with the fragmentation of Macedonian votes among the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM candidates.

CONCLUSION:

These local elections, more than ever, illustrated the deepening crisis of trust in the political system, reflected in record-low turnout and an increased number of invalid ballots. Untimely and instinctive changes to the electoral rules created legal uncertainty, further undermining citizens' trust in the electoral system and the equality of participants in the elections. At the same time, the elections for the first time in the country's recent history showed that no party stronghold is permanent, as numerous municipalities changed their political orientation.

As with all previous election cycles, this one also confirmed that local results largely reflect national political trends and inter-party relations at central level, with few exceptions. The outcome in several municipalities demonstrates that the electorate is willing to reward structures that govern well, punish those they are dissatisfied

with, and support new and fresh political actors—smaller parties and independent candidates. The record-low turnout in the local elections indicates a serious rise in citizen dissatisfaction, apathy, and alienation from political processes, calling into question the political and democratic legitimacy of the elected officials themselves. Meanwhile, the large number of invalid ballots points to growing protest behaviour among voters and distrust in the political offer, while also raising questions about the effectiveness of electoral rules and civic education for the electorate.

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Borjan Gjuzelov

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE COMMUNITY: STRENGTHENING RESPONSIBILITY AND SOLIDARITY THROUGH CIVIC AND POLITICAL EDUCATION

Academic literature and comparative experiences indicate that integrating civic and political content into the educational process has a positive impact on the consolidation and maintenance of modern democratic societies. Such integration is also associated with enhanced civic participation and the development of a higher level of political culture.[1]

Based on the above, the question arises: is there a need for more comprehensive civic, as well as political education for Macedonian pupils? Do they, as citizens who will build and shape Macedonian society in the decades ahead, possess sufficient knowledge, civic competencies, and critical thinking skills? Furthermore, it is important to open a broader discussion about the current characteristics and challenges of the Macedonian society and of the young population that should be addressed within future educational reforms. Do the current forms of education meet these needs, or is it necessary to introduce new content? The aim of this text is to summarize various findings already identified in previous research in order to contribute to current and future reflections on the direction civic and political education should take in primary and secondary schools.

In this context, political education—understood as a complement to the existing concept of civic education—refers to content related to questions about the organization of societies and communities, the distribution of power and resources, the processes of representative democracy, decision-making, and the functioning of state institutions.[2] This means that political education encompasses far more than the typical and widely accepted understanding of politics as "day-to-day politics," that is, the struggle of political parties and politicians for power and political influence.

A recent study on the presence of political and democratic content in secondary education in North Macedonia found that such content is very limited and often outdated.[3] Although some elements that reflect modern democratic values are included, there is a lack of topics that directly address their essence and the significance of democratic principles such as free and fair elections, the rule of law, separation of powers, and respect for human rights. The teaching materials contain almost no content that encourages active civic or student participation, and in some

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1 Judith Torney-Purta, et al, *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen* (Amsterdam: IEA Secretariat, 2001); Robert L. Dudley и Alan R. Gitelson, "Political Literacy, Civic Education, and Civic Engagement: A Return to Political Socialization?," *Applied Developmental Science* 6, бр. 4 (2002); Wolfram Schulz, et al, *Becoming Citizens in a Changing World: IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 International Report* (Springer Nature, 2018).

2 For a more detailed discussion of the relationship, similarities and differences between the concepts of civic and political education, as well as models of political education in Europe, see Ivan Damjanovski et al. Analysis of Political Education in North Macedonia. (Skopje: Westminster Democracy Foundation, 2023).

3 Борјан Ѓузелов, *Учиме ли демократија? Студија за демократските вредности во средното образование во Северна Македонија* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2024).

cases, there are even discriminatory examples that reproduce stereotypes and prejudices.[4]

On the other hand, a positive step forward has been made with the introduction of the subject Civic Education in the eighth and ninth grades of primary education and in the first year of vocational secondary schools.[5] With the introduction of this subject, students are given the opportunity to acquire basic knowledge about concepts such as personal, civic, and cultural identity, civil society, democratic values, and multiculturalism, as well as more specific political topics such as elections, separation of powers, and the rule of law. The teaching materials for Civic Education in the first year of vocational secondary education contain modern and relevant content presented in a clear and understandable way, and they represent an excellent example that should be followed in the future when preparing teaching materials in other social science subjects. What is concerning, however, is that despite the well-designed content, the subject Civic Education is not included in general secondary (gymnasium) education, where teaching is still conducted according to outdated curricula and textbooks derived from the gymnasium concept introduced in the 2001/2002 school year.[6]

PROBLEMATIC VALUE ORIENTATIONS, LOW TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS, AND SUSCEPTIBILITY TO DISINFORMATION

In recent years, several studies on the attitudes and values of young people[7] have been published, showing a continuous presence of undemocratic value orientations and susceptibility to populist and authoritarian influences. Empirical data indicate that more than three-quarters of young people (81%) believe that the country needs a "strong-handed leader." On the other hand, although there is a tendency to support authoritarian leadership, there is relatively lower agreement with ideas of dictatorship and the use of violence to resolve social conflicts. Finally, almost half of young people (43%) feel that they have no knowledge of politics.[8]

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4 Ibid.

5 The subject Civic Education in vocational secondary schools was first introduced in 2002 in the fourth year. In 2020, the curriculum was completely revised, and the subject is now taught in the first year. Civic Education in primary schools, in the eighth and ninth grades, was introduced in 2008.

6 Борјан Ѓузелов, *Учиме ли демократија? Студија за демократските вредности во средното образование во Северна Македонија* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2024).

7 Мартин Галевски, *Социополитичко учество на младите во Северна Македонија.* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2023). Мартин Галевски и Јована Ѓорѓиовска, *Младинско политичко отсуство* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2020); Мартин Галевски, *Социо-политичко учество на младите во Северна Македонија: Лет во место* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2021).

8 Мартин Галевски, *Социополитичко учество на младите во Северна Македонија.* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2023).

Additionally, young people express low levels of trust in system institutions and predominantly perceive social and political development as moving in the wrong direction. There is also a widespread belief that state authorities do not take their interests and needs into account, as two-thirds of young people (66%) feel they cannot influence what authorities do and how they operate.[9] This sense of resignation results in high levels of apathy and limited civic engagement.

Alongside these findings, there is a noted low level of media literacy and a high susceptibility to disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories. According to the Media Literacy Index for Southeast European countries, North Macedonia consistently ranks among the lowest-performing states, below the regional average for media literacy.[10] This situation results in widespread uncritical acceptance of unverified information, which is particularly pronounced among the young population aged 18 to 29. Research indicates that a significant portion of young people hold affirmative attitudes toward various conspiracy theories. More than half of them believe that "the world is controlled by a few powerful families" and that "the COVID-19 pandemic was deliberately created in a laboratory to control the population."[11] These data highlight the need to develop media literacy, critical thinking, and digital competence among young people as a prerequisite for building an informed and resilient democratic citizenship.

LOW SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Research also indicates a limited acceptance of social diversity, with young people demonstrating low tolerance toward individuals of different ethnic backgrounds or sexual orientations.[12] For example, 43% of young people would be uncomfortable having an LGBT neighbor, while one in three respondents would object to having a refugee as a neighbor. Additionally, around one-third of ethnic Macedonians would be bothered by having an Albanian (33%) or Roma (27%) neighbor, while among ethnic Albanians, the presence of a Serbian (32%) or Roma (28%) neighbor would be most objectionable.[13]

9   Мартин Галевски, *Социополитичко учество на младите во Северна Македонија: Лет во место* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2021).

10 Институт за отворено општество – Софија, *Индекс на медиумска писменост* (Софија: Институт за отворено општество – Софија).

11 Близнаковски и други 2021 – податочен сет на истражувањето

12 Marija Topuzovska Latkovikj et al. „Youth Study North Macedonia 2024: Navigating Discontent: Youth Perspectives on Education, Employment, and Migration," (Skopje: FES, 2024)

13 Мартин Галевски, *Социо-политичко учество на младите во Северна Македонија.* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2023

These attitudes point to the need for strengthened education on human rights, solidarity, and inclusion within both formal and non-formal educational systems.

Research also shows that the majority of young people perceive themselves as inactive citizens (78%), with three-quarters (74%) not belonging to any organization or other form of collective association. Among the remaining socially active youth, participation is most often within political parties or party youth organizations (10%), and nearly half as much in civic organizations (5%) or informal civic initiatives (4%). Additionally, there remains a low level of interest in volunteer activities among young people, with only one in five (20%) having any volunteer experience.[14]

These findings suggest that the issue is not limited to a lack of responsibility among young people but also reveals a deeper gap in the understanding of social solidarity, shared values, and orientation toward the common good. Limited tolerance, low involvement in volunteer or altruistic activities, and weak readiness for collective action indicate that young people rarely recognize the public interest as a space where they have both a role and a responsibility. This creates a risk of further weakening social cohesion and civic participation, which in turn hampers the development of a democratic political culture. Therefore, future curricula for civic and political education should not only convey democratic principles but also actively foster awareness of community, solidarity, and responsibility toward the public interest.

LOW INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY: PROLONGED YOUTH AND TENDENCY TOWARD PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYMENT

It is also important to highlight two other socio-political phenomena indicating low individual responsibility: the phenomenon of prolonged youth and the tendency toward public sector employment.

Like in most Southern European countries, young people in North Macedonia experience so-called prolonged youth, meaning they live with their parents and rely on family and family connections for a comparatively longer period. Indeed, young people in North Macedonia, similar to their peers in Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, leave their parental home and start building an independent life later than the European average . According to Eurostat, they leave home at an average age of 32, while their peers in the EU do so at an average age of 26. For illustration, there are significant

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14 Ibid.

differences within the EU: in Scandinavian countries, the average age is around 22, while in southern countries such as Italy and Portugal, it is 30.[15] Other studies also indicate that for more than half of young people in the country who still live with their parents (54%), this is the easiest and most convenient option, while for more than one-third (38%), it is an economic necessity—that is, they would live independently if they had adequate financial means.[16] These findings suggest that this situation, in addition to being influenced by socio-economic factors and objectively higher youth unemployment, also has a significant cultural component. This can be interpreted as a lack of personal responsibility for independence and building one's own life, separate from family ties and their patriarchal influences.

Furthermore, as in most post-socialist countries, a large part of the population in North Macedonia favors public sector employment. For example, comparative regional data show that nearly half of Macedonian citizens strongly prefer jobs in the public sector and state-owned enterprises (47%), compared to only 17% who prefer work in the private sector, and 34% who have no particular preference.[17] This tendency toward "secure" public sector jobs can also be interpreted as a lack of individual responsibility—that is, a tendency to secure one's livelihood through state employment, which often is not sufficiently stimulating to develop and realize young people's potential. Additionally, such employment is often clientelistic, based on party support in exchange for party activism and loyalty, which literature widely agrees has harmful effects on democratic processes.[18] However, encouragingly, the picture is significantly different among young people, as this tendency to favor public sector employment is declining. While in the past a larger percentage of young people preferred public sector jobs, today a higher percentage (37%) of young people prefer work in the private sector compared to 30% who prefer the public sector.[19]

In short, these two phenomena point to deeper structural and cultural constraints that reduce individual responsibility and proactivity among young people. In a context where independence is delayed, and professional ambition and achievement are often lacking, it is difficult to expect stronger civic and political mobilization.

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15 Eurostat, *Estimated average age of young people leaving the parental household, by sex (yth_demo_030)*, достапно на: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/yth_demo_030/default/table?lang=en

16 Marija Topuzovska Latkovikj et al. „Youth Study North Macedonia 2024: Navigating Discontent: Youth Perspectives on Education, Employment, and Migration," (Skopje: FES, 2024)

17 Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer Public Opinion 2022* (Sarajevo: RCC, 2022)

18 Bliznakovski, Jovan. "Varieties of political clientelism: A typology of clientelist exchanges in the Western Balkans and beyond." (Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans (2020).

19 Marija Topuzovska Latkovikj et al. „Youth Study North Macedonia 2024: Navigating Discontent: Youth Perspectives on Education, Employment, and Migration," (Skopje: FES, 2024).

**FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE COMMUNITY: STRENGTHENING RESPONSIBILITY
AND SOLIDARITY THROUGH CIVIC AND POLITICAL EDUCATION**

**DECEMBER
2025**

FROM POLITICAL INDIFFERENCE TO CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AND SOLIDARITY

Considering these characteristics of young people, there is a clear need for changes in educational curricula and their enrichment with more civic as well as political content. If civic rights are universally accessible to all, then civic and political education should also be universally accessible, contributing to more informed and responsible exercise of civic rights and duties. Civic and political content in education should foster values of individual responsibility and collective solidarity, empowering young people to be more independent and self-reliant on one hand, while also being more empathetic and socially engaged on the other.

In this regard, the first step that should be taken is to make Civic Education a mandatory subject for all students in secondary education, following the model of the curriculum already implemented in four-year vocational secondary schools. This implies its introduction in general secondary (gymnasium) education as well as in the three-year vocational secondary programs, ensuring that all students have access to a program that systematically and qualitatively addresses democratic values and stimulates active civic participation. Such a unified presence is essential because every secondary school student, regardless of the type of school, is simultaneously a citizen with rights and responsibilities, including the right to vote, which they acquire upon reaching adulthood.

Furthermore, in order to ensure a more comprehensive and integrated approach, it is necessary to revise other subjects whose curricula touch on topics of civic and political education, such as history, geography, sociology, philosophy, and others. Some of these textbooks contain outdated and controversial narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices and insufficiently promote values of civic responsibility and solidarity.[20] Therefore, a thorough revision and renewal of the curricula is needed, as well as the development of new, modern textbooks. These programs should be developed through a broad and inclusive consultative process, with the positive experience of the 2021 Civic Education program and handbook serving as an example of good practice and guidance for the creation of future teaching materials.[21] At the same time, the new curricula should be more thoughtfully and carefully structured, providing teachers with more concrete content-related, methodological, and pedagogical guidance. In this way,

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20 Борјан Ѓузелов, *Учиме ли демократија? Студија за демократските вредности во средното образование во Северна Македонија* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2024).

21 See: Група автори. *Граѓанско образование за средно стручно образование – Водич за наставници*. (Скопје: Македонски центар за граѓанско образование, 2021

conditions will be created for more effective teaching and the systematic development of civic and political competencies among students.

Contemporary educational approaches focus not only on acquiring declarative, theoretical knowledge of democratic concepts but also on gaining procedural, experiential knowledge through practicing democratic processes within the classroom context. This approach allows students not only to cognitively understand democratic principles but also to integrate them into their personal and social skills. In this context, there is an increasing trend to organize teaching in an interactive and participatory form, based on discussions and critical analysis of current and controversial social issues. Students develop, through this pedagogical model, independent thinking, civic responsibility, and the capacity for reasoned debate within a democratic school environment, while simultaneously learning and practicing democracy as a life and social skill.[22]

Alongside the introduction of more civic and political content into educational programs, it is necessary to ensure higher, unified quality of teaching through continuous professional development of teachers, introducing modern, interactive methods that promote active learning and greater student motivation. Teachers should be encouraged to integrate alternative resources such as films, online content, extracurricular visits, guest lectures, and educational podcasts, in order to create more dynamic and applied learning experiences.[23]

Finally, it is of great importance to systematically encourage student organization and civic engagement.[24] Democracy is best learned through direct experience; therefore, students should be encouraged to actively participate in school life and in the work of the local community. Given the low levels of civic engagement and trust in institutions, teaching content should include examples and practices of successful activism, volunteering, and socially beneficial work. In this context, schools should build stronger partnerships with civic organizations and initiatives, providing students with better access to real opportunities for participation and engagement in the community.

22 See: Diana Hess и Patricia Avery, "Discussion of Controversial Issues as a Form and Goal of Democratic Education," во *The SAGE Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy*, 506–18 (London: SAGE, 2008) и Murray Print, "Teacher Pedagogy and Achieving Citizenship Competences in Schools," во *Schools, Curriculum and Civic Education for Building Democratic Citizens*, 113–28 (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2012).

23 Борјан Ѓузелов, *Учиме ли демократија? Студија за демократските вредности во средното образование во Северна Македонија* (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2024).

24 Иван Дамјановски и други. *Анализа за политичкото образование во Северна Македонија*. (Скопје: Фондација за демократија на Вестминстер, 2023)

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the current needs and characteristics of young people in North Macedonia that can be addressed through the introduction of more comprehensive civic and political education. The analysis showed that young people face a range of structural and value-based constraints: insufficient political awareness, low trust in institutions, increased susceptibility to disinformation, limited tolerance toward diversity, low activism, and pronounced dependence on family and the state. These phenomena hinder the development of a democratic political culture and create fertile ground for populist and authoritarian influences. At the same time, despite positive examples in some educational reforms, curricula in many areas remain outdated and insufficiently focused on developing critical thinking, solidarity, and civic responsibility. Therefore, civic and political education needs to become a key pillar in creating a generation of young people who will participate independently, critically, responsibly, and in solidarity in building a more democratic and just society.

For further development, the paper proposes a series of integrated reforms: universal introduction of civic education as a mandatory subject in all secondary schools, thorough revision of curricula in related subjects and the development of modern textbooks, strengthening media literacy and critical thinking, as well as fostering a democratic school environment through interactive and practical learning methods. Equally important are continuous professional development for teachers and the establishment of mechanisms for regular monitoring of teaching quality. Finally, encouraging student activism, volunteering, and collaboration with civic organizations should become an integral part of the educational process, as democratic values are most effectively learned through practice. Only through such a systematic and long-term approach can create generations who understand democratic principles, feel responsibility toward the community, and actively contribute to the public good.

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SHORT BIOGRAPHY

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Pencho Kuzev

UNCONTROLLED
ALGORITHMIC POWER
THE THREAT TO
DEMOCRACY IS REAL

POLITICAL THOUGHT

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The algorithms of dominant online platforms determine which information becomes visible. They deliberately promote certain messages, drive their viral spread, and steer our behavior. According to the European Union's regulation[1] within the "Digital Strategy for Europe," these digital gatekeepers are required to make transparent how their recommendation systems display information. In addition, they must pay particular attention to four central risk areas: illegal content, violations of fundamental rights, dangers to democracy and public security, and risks to health. They must also thoroughly assess how their services contribute to the spread or amplification of disinformation—especially through algorithmic recommendation systems.

With its Digital Services Act (DSA) and other regulatory measures, the European Union is attempting to strengthen transparency and accountability in the digital public sphere. Nevertheless, the implementation is politically contested—especially since the speech by U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance on February 14, 2025, at the Munich Security Conference, in which he described European regulatory approaches as "censorship."[2] Vance and other U.S. representatives present European platform oversight measures as a threat to freedom of expression—and therefore as the greatest danger to Europe.[3]

This criticism ignores the fact that Europe's regulatory efforts are based on real experiences: social media has not only created new communication spaces but has also incited acts of violence, self-harm and accelerated the spread of dangerous conspiracy theories. Authoritarian states use disinformation as a weapon to manipulate public opinion, while criminals use platforms for fraud and extortion.[4]

HOW TIKTOK INFLUENCED ELECTIONS

In the recent presidential elections in Poland and Romania, TikTok played a central role in the rise of far-right candidates. Within a few weeks, previously little-known individuals became political heavyweights. The rapid increase in followers and the explosive spread of their content was no accident: it was the result of a targeted strategy of algorithmic amplification[5] of their political messages, executed by a loose network of ideologically

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1 Recital 70 et seq. of Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 (Digital Services Act)

2 Munich Security Conference 2025, Speech by J.D. Vance and Selected Reactions, Vol. 2, p. 15, https://securityconference.org/publikationen/buecher/key-speeches-volume-ii-jd-vance-msc-2025/ [last Access: 24.07.2025].

3 Ibid.

4 Damian Collins: "What happened at the AI summit in Paris?", in: The New World, 15.02.2025, www.thenewworld.co.uk/damian-collins-what-happened-at-the-ai-summit-in-paris/ [last Access: 24.07.2025].

5 This refers to a fully or partially automated system used by an online platform to suggest certain information to users on its online interface or to prioritize that information.

aligned or commercially motivated influencers—and the mass deployment of automated bot accounts.[6]

The events once again demonstrate how social media—and especially TikTok's recommendation mechanisms—can influence political dynamics and distort democratic processes: bot networks deliberately manipulate individual populist messages.. The goal is not to convince people but to deceive the platforms' recommendation algorithms. Bots artificially generate reach by massively simulating likes, shares, comments, and reposts. This tricks the platforms into automatically distributing largely manipulated content to ever broader audiences—as if these were organically emerging trends.[7]

RECOMMENDATION MECHANISMS WITH A FAR-RIGHT TILT

A few days before the Polish presidential runoff election on June 1, 2025, the international NGO Global Witness found: TikTok's algorithm showed new politically balanced user accounts twice as many far-right and nationalist posts as centrist or left-leaning feeds. Earlier tests in Poland and Romania likewise suggest that TikTok's recommendation algorithm systematically steers users toward far-right content. Test accounts showed content favoring national-conservative candidates far more frequently than content supporting centrist candidates[8]. A similar pattern emerged in Germany during the last Bundestag election: AfD content appeared disproportionately often as the first posts in TikTok's For- You-Feed .[9]

To what extent this increased presence of particular content mobilizes voters or influences their political choices is difficult to prove conclusively. However, one thing is clear: according to Eurobarometer, algorithmically curated Social-Media-Feeds have become the most important source of political information for Europeans under the age of thirty.[10] This is a concerning development that should put democratic forces on high alert—because those who control the channels of information increasingly shape the political opinions of young people.

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6   Martin Gak: "Poland 2025 – The digital engineering of Nawrocki's victory," in: Defend Democracy, 17.07.2025, https://defenddemocracy. eu/poland-2025-the-triumph-of-the-far-rights-digital-machine/ [last Access: 24.07.2025].

7   Ibid.

8   Global Witness: TikTok algorithm recommends twice as much hard-right content to users ahead of Polish election, London, 29.05.2025, https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/tiktok-algorithm-recommends-twice-as-much-hard-right-content-to-users-ahead-of-polish-election/ [last Access: 24.07.2025].

9   Anna Katzy-Reinshagen / Martin Degeling / Solveig Barth / Mauritius Dorn: "Wie TikTok mit parteipolitischen Inhalten im Vorfeld der Bundestagswahl 2025 umgeht," in: Institute for Strategic Dialogue gGmbH (ISD Germany), 22.02.2025, https://isdgermany.org/wahlkampf-im-feed-wie-tiktok-mit-parteipolitischen-inhalten-im-vorfeld-der-bundestagswahl-2025-umgeht/ [last accessed: 24.07.2025].

10   European Union: Youth Survey 2024, February 2025, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3392 [last Access: 24.07.2025].

ALGORITHMIC AMPLIFICATION
INSTEAD OF GENUINE MODERATION

Presently it is widely acknowledged: the promises of major digital platforms to fact-check and effectively moderate content have proven to be a feint.[11] Meta and Co. have long known that neither fact-checking nor content moderation can truly solve the underlying problem—one that is created by their own recommendation algorithms. An internal Meta document from 2019, leaked by U.S. computer scientist and whistleblower Frances Haugen, reached a sobering conclusion: large-scale moderation is impossible. Instead, the focus must be on preventing the algorithmic amplification of harmful content:

"We are never going to remove everything harmful from a communications medium used by so many, but we can at least do the best we can to stop magnifying harmful content by giving it unnatural distribution."[12]

The European Commission's current measures under the Digital Services Act—including several investigations against platform operators, a voluntary compromise by TikTok regarding a new product launch in Spain[13], and ongoing transparency studies—are steps in the right direction, but they fall far short of solving the problem.

Disinformation corrodes freedom of expression, undermines trust in democratic institutions, and damages the credibility of fact-based media. It is no longer just background noise in the digital public sphere but a systemic risk to democratic discourse and fair elections.

Initial studies show how foreign actors deliberately use disinformation to destabilize societies[14]. The experiences during the elections in Romania, Germany, and Poland give the European Commission sufficient grounds to initiate a comprehensive investigation under Article 34 DSA. The goal must be to identify, in a content-neutral way, the mechanisms that lead to the mass dissemination of disinformation—especially in the context of elections.

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11   Johnny Ryan: „Europe's race to rearm is pointless if its adversaries are waging war online", in: The Guardian, 15.04.2025, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/apr/15/us-europe-military-spending-trump-ireland [last Access: 24.07.2025].

12   Natasha Lomas: „Meta urged to pay reparations for Facebook's role in Rohingya genocide", in: TechCrunch, 29.09.2022, https://techcrunch.com/2022/09/29/amnesty-report-facebook-rohingya-reparations/ [letzter Zugriff: 24.07.2025].

13   As part of a formal EU Commission procedure, TikTok committed to fully and permanently withdraw the new program "TikTok Lite Rewards" and to refrain from introducing a similar program in the future. The program encouraged young people to spend more time on TikTok daily and complete tasks to earn points. These points could then be exchanged for vouchers, virtual currency, or other prizes.

14   Country Report: Assessment of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in the 2025 German Federal Election, https://fimi-isac.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Germany-CERA_Final.pdf [last Access: 24.07.2025].

WHO SHOULD CHOOSE:
USERS OR ALGORITHMS?

However, analysis alone is not enough. On the basis of Article 35 DSA, the Commission should take specific countermeasures—such as steps to curb algorithmic amplification mechanisms and at the same time strengthen user autonomy. In a democratic public sphere, all must be able to decide for themselves which content they want to see—instead of being guided by opaque recommendation systems based on profiling and attention-maximizing algorithms. Democratic discourse thrives on conscious choice, not algorithm-driven influence.

Such measures do not infringe on freedom of expression—the right to free speech is not restricted, only its artificial amplification. It concerns the power of algorithms, not people's opinions. European internet users should be able to decide for themselves what they say, see, and share online. Moreover, this power should not be left to systems that may be controlled by hostile foreign actors.

Once algorithmic recommendation systems are disabled, the automatic advantage for authoritarian content disappears. Instead of being systematically favored, such content must regain its place in the digital attention economy—competing in real time with cat videos, dance clips, and all other kinds of posts[15]. Disabling recommendation algorithms would not only relieve democratic debate but would also effectively protect children and adolescents from having toxic content pushed into their feeds without their consent.

The Digital Services Act and the General Data Protection Regulation provide strong instruments tailored to Europe's new security context. On the other hand, their effectiveness depends on political will—on the courage, responsibility, and awareness of the precarious situation Europe currently faces. The enforcement of these rules must not become a bargaining chip in trade relations with the United States or China. The issue is far greater: the protection of democracy.

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www.kas.de/de/web/die-politische-meinung/artikel/detail/-/content/unkontrollierte-algorithmische-macht

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15 Johnny Ryan: „Europe's race to rearm is pointless if its adversaries are waging war", in: The Guardian, 15.04.2025, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/apr/15/us-europe-military-spending-trump-ireland [last Access: 24.07.2025].

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Stefan Ivanovski

YOUTH, CULTURE, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK IN THE DIGITAL ERA: BETWEEN REALITY AND THE DEMOCRACY OF THE FUTURE

YOUTH: A GENERATION AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIGITAL AUTONOMY

The modern young person lives in a paradox of dual reality — between the local and the global, between traditional cultural values and the technological revolutions that are reshaping the world of labour, education, and political culture.[1] Macedonia, as part of the European space of cultural diversity and democratic aspirations, is today facing a pronounced socio-economic and cultural challenge: how to retain young people, strengthen their critical thinking, and create conditions in which they feel part of a society that believes in their potential.[2]

Although young people represent a key driver of social change, they are increasingly confronted with distrust in institutions, a lack of opportunities, and a sense of alienation from the political process.[3] At the same time, the global transformations brought by digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI) are redefining the very nature of labour and social participation.[4] Today, the question is not only whether young people will find employment, but how they will participate in shaping the future of work and democracy.[5]

1. THE LOCAL REALITY: YOUNG PEOPLE IN MACEDONIA BETWEEN APATHY AND THE DESIRE FOR BELONGING

Culture, as a way of life and a collection of spiritual and material values, plays a central role in shaping identity and the sense of belonging among young people.[6] But in the Macedonian context, systemic neglect, weak institutional support, corruption, and the lack of public and cultural spaces create an environment in which young people struggle to realize their creativity and critical thinking.

Research from the National Youth Strategy (2023–2027) indicates that young people face limited access to services, low levels of participation in public life, and distrust

1   Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 14.

2   Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 22.

3   Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 79

4   Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 45

5   Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2016), 31

6   Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 82.

in institutions.[7] Only 1 in 5 young people participates in creating cultural content or policies, even though 90% believe that culture is essential for quality of life.[8] This paradox between value awareness and practical inertia is a symptom of deeper institutional weakness.

In the past five years, more than 60,000 young people (up to 29 years old) have left the country.[9] The reasons are multilayered: insecurity, low wages, a dysfunctional judiciary, and a general sense that progress depends more on party affiliation than on competence.[10] The dysfunctionality of institutions pushes young people to seek a future in other countries, where their skills are valued and societies invest in their potential.

Thus, a "brain drain" phenomenon emerges that is not only economic but also cultural. Macedonia is not only losing workforce but also carriers of cultural memory and democratic energy.[11] Young people are not merely a number in statistics — they are part of the collective identity, without which cultural and social continuity is called into question.

2. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE FUTURE OF WORK: BETWEEN ECONOMIC AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION

Globally, artificial intelligence (AI) represents a new phase in technological evolution, one that does not eliminate all jobs but changes the way labour is organized and valued.[12] Instead of being viewed as a threat, AI should be understood as an instrument that reflects the power structures and the values of its creators .[13]

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7 *Национална стратегија за млади* 2023-2027 (Скопје: Агенција за млади и спорт, 2023).

8 Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje, *Youth Trends and Participation Report* (Скопје: IDSCS, 2024).

9 CEIC Data, "North Macedonia Youth Migration Statistics," accessed May 2025, https://www.ceicdata.com

10 World Bank, *Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2024* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2024), 17.

11 Vladimir Grujeski, *Младите во Македонија – реалии, предизвици и културна перспектива* (необјавен ракопис, 2025).

12 Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 47

13 Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 112
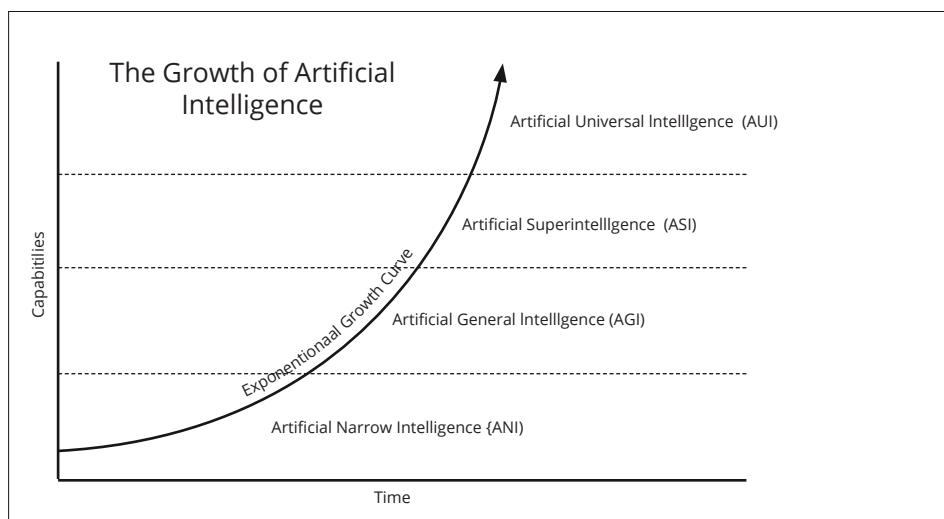
Picture 1: The Science of Machine Learning & AI. 2024. "The Accelerating Evolution of Artificial Intelligence." September 21. https://www.ml-science.com/blog/2024/9/9/the-future-of-artificial-intelligence.

Research shows that behind automation stands human labour — from low-paid annotators in Kenya to content moderators in Madagascar — and that the production of AI requires vast natural resources.[14] Technology is not independent from society but is the result of specific social and economic relations.

The problem is not the technology itself, but the distribution of the benefits it brings. The history of industrial revolutions shows that productivity increases, but workers' incomes and dignity often stagnate.[15] Since 1979, the gap between productivity and labour compensation in the United States has grown by 2.7 times, while democratic institutions have weakened.[16]

If AI brings increased productivity, the question is: who will enjoy the benefits? If they are concentrated only among the elites who own capital, inequality will deepen, and social cohesion will erode. Therefore, one of the key answers is the democratization of labour — involving workers and young people in decisions on how new technologies should be used.[17]

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[14] Freedom House, *Freedom and Technology Report 2025* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2025), 9.

[15] Isabelle Ferreras, *Firms as Political Entities: Saving Democracy through Economic Bicameralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 84.

[16] Economic Policy Institute, "Charting Wage Stagnation," EPI Report (Washington, DC: EPI, 2025), https://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/.

[17] Goldman Sachs, "How Will AI Affect the Global Workforce?" *Goldman Sachs Insights*, April 2025.

Examples from Europe and around the world show that this is possible:

> In Germany, workers' councils participate in the implementation of new technologies;[18]

> In Sweden, trade unions and employers jointly co-create technological solutions;[19]

> In Slovenia, a Law on Worker Ownership has been adopted, and in the United States, groups of investors are developing new models of employee ownership to ensure that more workers have ownership stakes in the companies where they work.[20]

These examples confirm that economic democracy is not utopia, but a practical framework for sustainable development.[21] Through collective ownership, voice, and participation, workers become co-creators of economic processes.

3. YOUTH AS DRIVERS OF THE FUTURE: FROM PASSIVE OBSERVERS TO ACTIVE CO-CREATORS

Young generations are the most affected by automation and digitalization, especially at entry-level positions in the labour market.[22] If mechanisms for their active inclusion are not created — through education, retraining, critical literacy, and participation in decision-making — they risk remaining consumers of technology rather than its creators.[23]

Instead of being exhausted by the system, young people should be included in its transformation.[24] This implies public policies that encourage partnerships between the state, universities, the business sector, and civil society organizations, with the goal of creating an innovative, culturally aware, and democratically responsible generation.[25]

In Macedonia, this means rebuilding trust through meritocracy, supporting youth initiatives, and eradicating partisan conditioning.[26] If young people are given space to create and real choices, they will build a society where culture, technology, and democracy develop in parallel.[27]

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18   German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, *White Paper: Work 4.0* (Berlin: BMAS, 2017).

19   OECD, *The Future of Work: OECD Employment Outlook 2024* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).

20   Financial Times, "The Graduate Jobpocalypse: Where Have All the Entry-Level Jobs Gone?" *FT Working It*, November 2024.

21   Isabelle Ferreras and Julie Battilana, "Democratizing Work: The Case for Economic Democracy," *Harvard Business Review*, July 2020

22   International Labour Organization (ILO), *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Technology, Transition and Inclusion* (Geneva: ILO, 2024), 6.

23   UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 2021), 54.

24   Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

25   European Commission, *Youth Work and Democratic Participation: Policy Recommendations for Europe 2025* (Brussels: European Commission, 2025).

26   OECD, *Bridging the Skills Gap: Youth Employment and Innovation in South-Eastern Europe* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023).

27   Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 27.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT BETWEEN CULTURE, LABOR, AND TECHNOLOGY

Macedonian society, like many other small democracies, is at a crossroads where the question is not whether we will integrate into the digital era, but how we will shape it.[28] It is precisely young people, through their creativity, critical thinking, and digital awareness, who can become the new architects of social democracy.[29]

For this to happen, it is necessary to create a new social contract in which culture and labour are treated not as separate spheres but as mutually dependent pillars of modern democracy.[30] Only through inclusion, dignity, and free thought can young people turn technology from a challenge into an opportunity, and democracy from a word into a lived experience.[31]

This social contract should focus on valuing cultural capital, democratizing economic processes, and applying technology ethically as a means for public good rather than domination.[32] In this way, Macedonia can position its young generation as a driving force not only of national but also of European humanistic progress.[33]

28 Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 54

29 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 37.

30 United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2024: Breaking the Gridlock – Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World* (New York: UNDP, 2024), 11

31 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 85

32 World Economic Forum (WEF), *Shaping the Future of the Digital Economy: A New Social Contract for the AI Age* (Geneva: WEF, 2023).

33 Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 122

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

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Anita Nikolovska

VOICES IN THE SILENCE: HOW MACEDONIAN YOUTH NAVIGATE POLITICS

POLITICAL THOUGHT

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary North Macedonia, the relationship between youth and politics presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the country's democratic development. Young people constitute nearly a fifth of the population, yet their voices remain underrepresented in political life and decision-making structures. This paradox—a generation that is increasingly educated, digitally connected, and socially aware yet politically marginalized—highlights the complex interplay between disillusionment, institutional mistrust, and the search for new forms of participation.

This article argues that the limited political participation of young people in North Macedonia is not a result of apathy but rather a reflection of structural barriers, insufficient political education, and the transformation of political engagement into informal and digital forms. Drawing on recent studies and regional comparisons, it examines how Macedonian youth navigate the political landscape through activism, civic engagement, and social media, while often distancing themselves from traditional institutions and parties.

It situates Macedonian youth within broader European trends, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for democratic renewal. The goal is to identify pathways for increasing meaningful youth engagement while addressing structural and informational barriers.[1]

1. ACTIVISM, CIVIC PARTICIPATION, AND LOCAL PROBLEMS

Youth activism in North Macedonia reflects a paradox of engagement without institutional anchoring. While young people are increasingly vocal on social issues—environmental protection, gender equality, education, and social justice—their participation largely occurs outside formal political or civic channels. According to the OSCE Mission to Skopje (2023), approximately 45 percent of young respondents reported engaging in civic initiatives or volunteering during the previous year, yet fewer than 10 percent were members of registered youth associations.[2]

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1 Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), *Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia* (Skopje: WFD, 2024), 12. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

2 OSCE, *Perceptions, Views, and Challenges of Young People in North Macedonia* (Skopje: OSCE Mission to Skopje, 2023), 34. https://www.osce.org/mission-to-skopje/575470

Table 1: Youth Engagement in Civic Activities in North Macedonia (2023)

Activity	Percentage of Youth Engaged
Volunteering / Civic initiatives	45%
Member of registered youth association	10%
Participated in local consultation	32%
Digital activism / campaigns	38%

Source: *OSCE, 2023; WFD, 2024.*

This indicates that Macedonian youth are politically active, but on their own terms. Many prefer flexible, issue-oriented activism rather than joining established structures such as political parties, trade unions, or formal NGOs.[3] Examples include environmental protests, digital campaigns against gender-based violence, and student-led movements for educational reform, often facilitated through social media. [4]The rise of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook has created spaces where young people can mobilize, share information, and create digital campaigns that reach hundreds or thousands within hours. Such platforms, while informal, have become central to youth engagement in political discourse.[5]

At the local level, structural barriers persist. Municipal youth councils, established under the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020), are often underfunded and politically marginalized.[6] Their advisory role is frequently symbolic, limiting the capacity for meaningful input. The WFD (2024) reports that more than two-thirds of young people have never participated in local consultations or decision-making processes.[7]

Nevertheless, youth-led initiatives demonstrate the potential for democratic renewal from below. Programs like Europe House in Skopje and in several other cities and Youth Can's Youth Local Banks have successfully connected young activists with municipalities to address urban planning, cultural events, and environmental issues.[8] When youth are granted authority and access to resources, they can transform local environments and strengthen civic norms. For example, in Skopje and Kriva Palanka,

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3 Ibid., 36.

4 Youth Can, Youth Local Banks Portfolio (Skopje: Youth Can, 2023) https://shorturl.at/ULiAX

5 Ibid.

6 Government of North Macedonia, Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, Official Gazette no. 10/20.

7 WFD, *Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia*, 45. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

8 Ibid., 47.

youth-led initiatives contributed to urban greening projects and cultural festivals that enhanced local community engagement, showcasing how civic projects can foster both social cohesion and political awareness.[9]

Without systemic integration of youth voices, however, activism risks remaining temporary and reactive. One 22-year-old focus group participant noted, "We participate when something angers us, but rarely because we feel institutions are ours.[10] This statement captures a broader sentiment: while youth are motivated to act, their engagement is often episodic, issue-based, and disconnected from institutionalized political structures.

Comparatively, countries in the Western Balkans face similar challenges. In Albania and Serbia, youth participation remains primarily issue-oriented, reflecting skepticism toward traditional political institutions and reliance on informal activism[11]. These regional parallels highlight that North Macedonia's experience is part of a wider generational trend in transitional democracies, where formal institutions struggle to attract and sustain young participants.

2. POLITICAL EDUCATION AND LITERACY

Political literacy—the ability to understand, evaluate, and act upon political information—is a key determinant of democratic participation. In North Macedonia, this foundation remains fragile. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Youth Study (2023/24) found that only 18 percent of young respondents feel sufficiently informed about political processes.[12] Nearly half reported rarely or never following political news.[13]

Formal civic education remains largely theoretical. Schools focus on memorization of institutional structures rather than critical engagement with political dynamics.[14] Several school-based civic education initiatives in North Macedonia have introduced participatory methods — student councils, debate programs, and project-based learning — aimed at moving civic instruction from rote memorization toward active

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9 Youth Can, Youth Local Banks Portfolio (Skopje: Youth Can, 2023) https://shorturl.at/ULiAX

10 OSCE, Perceptions, Views, and Challenges of Young People in North Macedonia (Skopje: OSCE Mission to Skopje, 2023), 35. https://www.osce.org/mission-to-skopje/575470

11 Migration Policy Institute (MPI), Civic and Political Engagement of Youth in the Western Balkans (Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2021), 23–25. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/civic-political-engagement-youth-western-balkans

12 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). Youth Study North Macedonia 2023/24: Navigating Discontent. Youth Perspectives on Education, Employment, and Migration. Skopje: FES, 2024, 42. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/skopje/21550.pdf

13 Ibid., 44.

14 Ministry of Education and Science, National Civic Education Framework (Skopje: Government of North Macedonia, 2022), 14.

citizenship. Evaluations and national studies suggest such approaches can increase students' confidence in civic action, but their reach remains limited and uneven across municipalities.[15]

Social media now dominate as a source of political information. The WFD (2024) indicates that over 70 percent of youth primarily rely on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.[16] While digital media increases access to information and enables political mobilization, it also amplifies misinformation and algorithmic echo chambers[17] Misperceptions about political processes, coupled with selective exposure to news, can distort young people's understanding of elections, policy debates, and party politics.[18]

Nevertheless, digital platforms also provide opportunities for civic engagement and informal education. Initiatives like Vidi Vaka use interactive videos, quizzes, and online campaigns to inform youth about democratic participation, voting, and civil rights.[19] By making civic education visually appealing and interactive, such programs can counteract the limitations of traditional curricula.[20]

Political education in North Macedonia must evolve beyond textbooks to nurture competence, agency, and critical thinking, enabling young people not only to understand politics but to actively shape it. As John Dewey wrote:"Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.[21] Developing critical media literacy is particularly urgent, given the increasing role of social networks in shaping political discourse.

Comparatively, youth in Western Europe are generally more exposed to interactive civic education and participatory programs, though challenges remain in addressing social media influence and political misinformation. North Macedonia can learn from these experiences by integrating formal education with innovative digital civic engagement strategies.[22]

15 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Youth Study North Macedonia 2023/24: Navigating Discontent. Youth Perspectives on Education, Employment, and Migration (Skopje: FES, 2024), https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/skopje/21550.pdf

16 WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 28. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

17 CONNEKT Consortium, Micro Approaches to the Study of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in MENA and the Balkans (Barcelona/International: IEMed / CONNEKT, April 2024), link: https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/D7.3-Report-on-micro-level-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-MENA-and-the-Balkans.pdf

18 Ibid.

19 "Vidi Vaka Media Platform," Annual Report 2023.

20 Ibid.

21 John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 357.

22 Migration Policy Institute (MPI). Civic and Political Engagement of Youth in the Western Balkans. Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2021, 27. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/civic-political-engagement-youth-western-balkans

3. YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

Formal political participation among young Macedonians remains limited. Party membership, candidacy, and office-holding are largely inaccessible. According to WFD (2024), only 9.9 percent of youth are members of political parties, and just 2.5 percent hold parliamentary mandates.[23]Youth wings of parties often lack real influence, reducing young members to symbolic representation.[24]

The Migration Policy Institute (2021) reports that North Macedonia ranks below the Western Balkans average in youth political participation, scoring 40 percent on their index compared to a regional average of 52 percent.[25] Barriers include hierarchical decision-making, absence of youth-oriented policies in party platforms, and limited opportunities for mentorship or leadership development.[26]

Table 2: Youth Political Participation Indicators

Indicator	North Macedonia	Western Balkans Average
Party Membership	9.9%	12%
Parliamentary Office Holding	2.5%	4%
Voting Turnout (2023 Local Elections)	64%	58%

Source: *WFD 2024; MPI 2021.*

Some local trends are more encouraging. Young politicians are increasingly visible at the municipal level, often through issue-based campaigns or coalition initiatives. Quotas for youth candidates, transparent internal party elections, and mentorship programs could facilitate greater representation and inject new energy into political institutions.[27] Programs supporting women and rural youth participation are particularly effective, highlighting how inclusion policies can address intersecting social barriers.[28]

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[23] WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 51. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia
[24] Ibid., 52.
[25] Migration Policy Institute (MPI). Civic and Political Engagement of Youth in the Western Balkans. Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2021, 30. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/civic-political-engagement-youth-western-balkans
[26] Ibid., 31.
[27] WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 53. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia
[28] Ibid., 54.

Regional comparisons show that youth representation in formal politics remains a common challenge across Southeastern Europe. Countries like Croatia and Slovenia, with stronger youth engagement policies and formal mechanisms, have higher rates of youth office-holding and party membership, suggesting that institutional reform can yield tangible results.[29]

4. TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND THE POLITICAL SCENE

Trust in institutions is a fundamental precondition for democratic engagement. Without confidence in the actors and structures of governance, youth are less likely to participate meaningfully, whether in voting, activism, or formal politics. In North Macedonia, as shown in table 3, trust among young people remains strikingly low. The **WFD (2024)** survey found that only **12 percent** of youth trust political parties and fewer than 20 percent trust Parliament.[30] Civil society organizations and the police enjoy relatively higher trust levels—41 percent and 36 percent, respectively.[31]

Table 3: **Trust in Institutions among Macedonian Youth (2024)**

Institution	Trust Percentage
Political Parties	12%
Parliament	18%
Police	36%
NGOs	41%

Source: WFD, 2024

Low trust stems from perceptions of corruption, lack of accountability, and limited responsiveness to youth concerns. Studies show that disillusionment is particularly acute regarding traditional parties and national political elites.[32] Many young people perceive party politics as hierarchical and dominated by entrenched interests, leading to the view that participation is futile. A focus group participant in Skopje explained:

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29 Migration Policy Institute (MPI). Civic and Political Engagement of Youth in the Western Balkans. Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2021, 32-34. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/civic-political-engagement-youth-western-balkans

30 WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 55. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

31 Ibid., 56.

32 OSCE, Perceptions, Views, and Challenges of Young People in North Macedonia (Skopje: OSCE Mission to Skopje, 2023), 40. https://www.osce.org/mission-to-skopje/575470

*"Even if we join a party or vote, the decisions are already made. We feel like observers rather than participants.[33]

Nevertheless, young people demonstrate a willingness to trust and engage with alternative institutions, such as NGOs, local councils, and online civic platforms.[34] Initiatives like **Youth Local Banks** illustrate that when institutions are responsive, transparent, and participatory, youth engagement increases significantly.[35] These experiences highlight that trust is not static—it can be cultivated through sustained interaction, visible impact, and accountability.

Regional comparisons suggest similar patterns across the Western Balkans. In Albania and Serbia, low trust in national institutions coexists with higher trust in local organizations, grassroots initiatives, and international NGOs.[36] This indicates that youth do not reject engagement entirely but prefer institutional channels that are credible, transparent, and outcome-oriented. Such findings underline the importance of **institutional reform and responsiveness** in fostering long-term youth participation.

5. ELECTIONS AND VOTING

Electoral participation remains the most conventional form of political engagement. The **WFD (2024)** reports that **64 percent** of youth voted in the 2023 local elections, a slight increase from 59 percent in 2020.[37] While these figures suggest moderate engagement, qualitative evidence reveals a more nuanced picture. Many young voters participate out of habit, social pressure, or civic duty rather than a genuine sense of political efficacy.[38]

First-time voters often report frustration with opaque processes, party dominance, and limited influence over outcomes. A 19-year-old voter in Tetovo commented: "Voting feels like a ritual. I am not sure my voice changes anything.[39] Despite these perceptions, initiatives targeting first-time voters—such as civic education campaigns and digital outreach via social media—have shown promise in increasing awareness and turnout.[40]

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33 Ibid., 41.

34 Youth Can, Youth Local Banks Portfolio (Skopje: Youth Can, 2023) https://shorturl.at/ULiAX

35 Ibid.

36 Migration Policy Institute (MPI). Civic and Political Engagement of Youth in the Western Balkans. Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2021, 35. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/civic-political-engagement-youth-western-balkans

37 WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 60. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

38 Ibid., 61.

39 OSCE, Perceptions, Views, and Challenges of Young People in North Macedonia (Skopje: OSCE Mission to Skopje, 2023), 42. https://www.osce.org/mission-to-skopje/575470

40 WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 62. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

Comparatively, youth turnout in EU member states for the 2019 European Parliament elections averaged **42 percent**.[41] North Macedonia's youth turnout appears relatively high by regional standards, but the **quality of participation**, defined as informed, deliberate, and sustained engagement, remains low. Enhancing civic literacy, increasing visibility of electoral impact, and creating youth-inclusive consultation mechanisms could transform routine voting into meaningful democratic action.[42]

RECOMMENDATIONS

To translate the potential of youth engagement into meaningful democratic participation, several interrelated strategies should be pursued. These strategies combine structural reform, educational innovation, and trust-building to create an environment where young citizens can actively shape society.

1. **Strengthen Institutional Mechanisms for Youth Participation**
   Municipal youth councils and other consultative bodies should be granted real decision-making authority, clear budgets, and stable channels for policy input. National policies must ensure that youth voices are systematically integrated into legislative and governance processes, rather than being treated as symbolic consultation.[43]Formalizing these mechanisms can empower youth to influence policy, enhance civic responsibility, and foster a sense of ownership over local and national decisions.

2. **Enhance Political and Civic Education**
   Schools, universities, and informal programs should foster critical thinking, media literacy, and active citizenship. The above-mentioned initiatives have demonstrated the effectiveness of participatory projects, debates, and student councils in enhancing civic competencies. Scaling these programs nationally and integrating digital tools can help youth navigate complex political information, critically assess media content, and make informed decisions.[44]

3. **Reform Political Parties and Leadership Opportunities**
   Political parties should open leadership and decision-making spaces for youth, implement mentorship programs, and adopt transparent internal promotion mechanisms. This can address structural barriers and create pathways

41 European Parliament, Post-election Survey 2019 – First Results, 1 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/euroba-rometer/post-election-survey-2019-first-results

42 WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 63. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

43 Government of North Macedonia, Law on Youth Participation, 10/20.

44 Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia (Skopje: WFD, 2024), https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

from grassroots activism to formal political influence, strengthening the representation of young perspectives in institutional politics. Special attention to women, rural youth, and marginalized groups can ensure more inclusive political participation.[45]

4. **Rebuild Trust between Youth and Institutions**

Transparency, accountability, and intergenerational dialogue are essential for restoring confidence in political institutions. Governments and parties must respond visibly to youth concerns, communicate achievements, and demonstrate that engagement produces tangible results. Evidence from local initiatives suggests that visible impact is crucial for fostering long-term trust.[46]

5. **Support and Scale Local Youth-Led Initiatives**

Community-driven projects in areas such as environmental protection, urban planning, and social innovation should be recognized, supported, and connected to formal governance structures. These initiatives empower youth, strengthen civic norms, and provide practical examples of democratic participation in action. Expanding funding, mentorship, and cross-municipal networking can enhance their reach and impact.[47]

By implementing these strategies in an integrated and sustained manner, North Macedonia can transform episodic activism into continuous, institutionalized participation, ensuring that youth are active agents of democratic renewal rather than passive observers.[48]

CONCLUSION

Young people in North Macedonia occupy a complex and paradoxical position in the country's democratic landscape. They are educated, digitally connected, and socially aware, yet their voices remain underrepresented in political institutions and decision-making structures. While willing to engage, their participation is often informal, episodic, and issue-driven rather than structured, sustained, and institutionalized.[49]

45 Migration Policy Institute (MPI). Civic and Political Engagement of Youth in the Western Balkans. Washington, D.C.: MPI, 2021, 36. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/civic-political-engagement-youth-western-balkans

46 CONNEKT Consortium, Micro Approaches to the Study of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in MENA and the Balkans (Barcelona/International: IEMed / CONNEKT, April 2024), https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/D7.3-Report-on-micro-level-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-MENA-and-the-Balkans.pdf

47 Youth Can, Youth Local Banks Portfolio (Skopje: Youth Can, 2023) https://shorturl.at/ULiAX .

48 WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 65. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

49 WFD, Fourth Study of Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia, 66. https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia

Structural, educational, and motivational barriers—hierarchical party structures, underfunded municipal youth councils, limited civic education, and distrust of political elites—continue to inhibit youth engagement.[50] Motivated youth often find alternative avenues for influence through grassroots initiatives, digital activism, and informal community engagement.[51] These pathways demonstrate creativity, resilience, and a desire to contribute to societal change, highlighting that youth apathy is not a defining feature of the generation but a response to structural constraints.

Ultimately, the evidence points to a generation that is skeptical yet motivated, digitally adept yet institutionally marginalized. For North Macedonia's democracy to thrive, sustained efforts are needed to integrate youth voices into formal political structures, foster trust, and equip young citizens with the knowledge and skills required for meaningful engagement. By doing so, North Macedonia can harness the energy and innovation of its youth as a driver of democratic renewal, turning episodic activism into a permanent and transformative force.[52]

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3. Ibid., 36.

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50 OSCE, Perceptions, Views, and Challenges of Young People in North Macedonia (Skopje: OSCE Mission to Skopje, 2023), 44. https://www.osce.org/mission-to-skopje/575470
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52 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). Youth Study North Macedonia 2023/24: Navigating Discontent. Youth Perspectives on Education, Employment, and Migration. Skopje: FES, 2024, 50. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/skopje/21550.pdf

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