FIELDS OF BECOMING: YOUTH, CULTURE, AND THE MAKING OF PARTICIPATION

Democracy in Action research in North Macedonia

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between youth and culture is crucial to encourage and understand the participation of young people in the social, cultural, and democratic life in society. Culture gives opportunities for creative expression, education, participation, and community engagement, while cultural organisations and initiatives often represent spaces where young people can develop skills, build networks, and become active contributors to society. At the same time, the extent to which young people can participate in cultural life depends on the wider policy, institutional, and socio-cultural environment, including the mechanisms and support structures available within both youth and cultural sectors.

This research focuses on the intersection between youth and culture in North Macedonia, examining how young people are recognised, supported, and engaged within the cultural ecosystem. It aims to provide an overview of the current landscape of youth involvement in culture by analysing both cultural and youth sectors and the ways in which these two areas intersect. Particular attention is given to the structures and mechanisms that support young artists, emerging cultural practitioners, and young people's participation in artistic and cultural practices.

The objective of the research is to map, analyse, and understand the interrelation between the culture and youth sectors, including existing gaps as well as models of cooperation and engagement. More specifically, the research examines how young people communicate and work with cultural organisations through different forms of involvement, as programme creators, participants in cultural activities, collaborators, emerging professionals, and audiences. To understand the socio-cultural and political context in which youth participation in culture takes place, the research examines how youth-related issues are addressed within cultural policy and how cultural participation is addressed within youth policy.

The research applies a combined methodological approach consisting of three complementary components. The first component, **Public Policies Analysis,** examines the existing legislative and strategic framework in the fields of culture and youth, with a focus on the mechanisms, opportunities, and limitations for youth participation in cultural life. The second component, **Civil Society Art and Cultural Organisations in North Macedonia: Structures, Practices, and Conditions of Work**, is based on survey research and contextual analysis of independent arts and cultural organisations, exploring their organisational models, working conditions, practices, and role in creating opportunities for youth participation and engagement. The third component, **Towards Youth as Cultural Actors: Recommendations from the RYCO Participatory Process**, builds on participatory activities with young people, cultural organisations, and relevant stakeholders to present a set of recommendations that identify needs, challenges, and possible mechanisms to strengthen youth participation in culture.

Through this approach, the research seeks to identify existing opportunities and barriers, understand the current models of youth engagement in cultural life, and contribute to the development of mechanisms that will strengthen the position of young people as creators, cultural professionals, decision-makers, and active contributors to cultural development.

1. PUBLIC POLICIES (DESKTOP) ANALYSIS

Public policies in North Macedonia are the foundational framework through which governments plan, regulate, organise, and support different public sectors, among which the cultural sector. They define the vision, priorities, and instruments through which these sectors are to be developed. Structured through laws, strategies, funding schemes, institutional arrangements, and international frameworks, public policies set the direction for a given sector and provide the organisational basis for advancing its development.

This research focuses on two significant policy sectors in North Macedonia, **youth** and **culture**, and more specifically, on the space where these two intersect. This desktop analysis aims to examine and evaluate the opportunities and mechanisms that the existing institutional framework offers to young people for active participation in cultural life and practice.

The analysis looks at existing laws, strategies, mechanisms, and programmes that support, or potentially hinder, young artists, emerging cultural practitioners, and broader youth engagement in the arts and culture. In doing so, youth policies will be reviewed and analysed through a cultural lens, with attention to the opportunities they create for young people to work and develop in the field of culture. Cultural policies, in turn, will be examined specifically from the perspective of what they offer to young people, in terms of participation, access, and the opportunity to practice and create culture.
Throughout this analysis, the term "youth" refers to the age range of 15 to 29 years, in accordance with the Macedonian Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020), which aligns with the definition used in the European Youth Strategy 2019–2027.

1.1 Cultural policy

The cultural sector in the Republic of North Macedonia is still governed by the **Law on Culture,** dating from 1998. Since its adoption, the law has been amended sixteen times[1], primarily to align it with other systemic legislation. However, rather than strengthening the legal framework, these successive amendments have led to a gradual loss of clarity and coherence, particularly in defining and protecting the concept of national interest in culture. Since 2018, there have been two unsuccessful attempts[2] to introduce a new Law on Culture. Both efforts ultimately failed, leaving unresolved structural issues that a new law was expected to address. Among the key provisions that did not make it into force were the formal recognition of cultural workers under a freelance system of social and professional benefits, the introduction of multi-year financing alongside the existing annual project-based funding model, and the establishment of mixed institutions at the national level. The absence of these reforms continues to limit the development of a more flexible and inclusive cultural sector, particularly for the non-institutional cultural sector. Therefore, this analysis refers to the provisions of the current Law on Culture (1998) as the relevant legal framework for examining the support and conditions for youth participation in culture.

1 Last amended, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 11, 18.01.2018.

2 Draft Law on Exercising the Public Interest in Culture — published in the Unique National Electronic Register of Regulations (ENER) in 2018, voted by the Government in 2019, not voted on by the Parliament in 2020; and Draft Law on Culture — published in ENER, followed by a public debate and voted by the Government in 2023, but again not voted on by the Parliament.

Under this Law, youth have equal access to education, practice, and participation in culture, as stated under Art. 3: "Everyone may practice culture as an individual, local, and national interest, for profit or non-profit purposes, in accordance with the law", followed by Art. 4, para. 1: "Everyone has the right, regardless of age, education, religious, ethnic, or other affiliation, to free creative expression, whether non-professional or professional, as well as the right to education in the field of culture." These provisions establish that age is not a limiting factor in accessing or practising culture, placing youth in an equal position with all other citizens, regardless of the form or type of creative expression.

Furthermore, under this Law and the regulations on commercial companies, any artist who pursues creative work professionally as their sole occupation may register as a sole proprietor, thereby acquiring the status of a freelance artist and entering the system of monthly social benefits covering contributions based of the average gross salary (Art. 13 & Art. 14). This provision enables young cultural practitioners working as professional artists to become self-employed, while the state partially protects their labour rights by covering the contributions to health, pension, and disability insurance and personal income tax of the average gross salary.

Youth as a specific category are referenced in only two provisions of the Law. Art. 54 defines the work of the houses of culture to functionally and programme-wise encourage and develop creative expression, with particular emphasis on that of children and youth, implying that these institutions serve as the primary local infrastructure for youth cultural engagement, production, and promotion. Art. 61, paragraph 3 requires the Ministry of Culture to include support for youth cultural activities within its annual plan for the realisation of the national interest in culture. These are the only two provisions in the entire Law that directly address youth. Given that the Law on Culture has been in force since 1998, the near-absence of youth-specific provisions reflects a systemic gap, where youth, even when acknowledged as artistic and cultural creators, are not explicitly integrated into the legal framework as active cultural participants with defined rights, targeted mechanisms, or dedicated support structures.

The current Law on Culture has long required comprehensive reform to address the evolving needs of both institutional and non-institutional actors. In particular, it should move beyond narrow definitions of artistic and cultural practice toward a broader understanding of culture as both an individual artistic endeavour and an institutional cultural field. This need was already recognised in the National Strategy for the Development of Culture in the Republic of Macedonia 2018–2022, which called for the adoption of a new Law on Culture. The first reform attempt began in 2018, when the Draft Law on Exercising the Public Interest in Culture was published in the Unified National Electronic Register of Regulations (ENER) for public consultation. The process was soon suspended by the Ministry of Culture[3], before being revived in 2019 with a revised draft that was approved by the Government but never submitted to Parliament. The initiative remained dormant until 2023, when the Ministry reopened the process, publishing a new Draft Law on Culture for public consultation through ENER, followed by a public debate. Although the Government adopted the draft in 2023, it did not pass in Parliament, leaving the amended 1998 Law on Culture still in force[4]. Both drafts proposed more substantive and

3 The Ministry of Culture has changed its name to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2024. Hereby in the text, even for the documents that are developed after 2024 we refer to it as Ministry of Culture as it concerns the issues we are analysing in this text.

4 Violeta Kachakova and Biljana Tanurovska–Kjulavkovski both served as national consultants to the Ministry of Culture and members of the working group responsible for drafting the 2019 Law on Culture. They contributed in particular to the provisions regulating the financing of the public interest in culture, as well as the legal framework for freelance artists and the associated system of social benefits. Biljana Tanurovska–Kjulavkovski also served as a member of the working group that prepared the 2023 draft Law on Culture.

conceptual changes to the legal framework governing the public interest in culture, with the aim of establishing a stronger legal basis for improving the conditions for artistic creation and cultural work across all cultural fields. For the non-institutional sector, the proposed reforms included multi-year funding mechanisms, inclusion of cultural workers in the system of monthly benefits of freelance artists, advanced decentralisation in culture, and the establishment of mixed (hybrid) public–private cultural institutions at the national level, extending a model currently available only to local governments.
The repeated suspension and delay of these reforms illustrate a broader policy pattern in which culture has not been treated as a strategic priority, but has instead remained vulnerable to changing political agendas and shifts in government.

Regarding **national cultural policy**, the last strategy adopted by Parliament remains the National Strategy for the Development of Culture 2018–2022. Since then, efforts to establish a new strategic framework have followed a similar trajectory to the reform of the Law on Culture. The Draft National Strategy for the Development of Culture in the Republic of North Macedonia 2023–2027[5] was prepared in 2023. It assessed the current state of the cultural sector and proposed strategic objectives, measures, actions, and indicators addressing the needs of the institutional and non-institutional cultural sectors, as well as the creative industries. Although the Government adopted the draft in 2023, it did not pass in Parliament; therefore, the last strategy in power remains one from 2018-2022. Since the expiry of that strategy, no new strategic planning document has been adopted, leaving the cultural sector without an updated policy framework for planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
A new **Draft National Strategy for the Development of Culture in the Republic of North Macedonia 2026–2030** has since been prepared and is currently undergoing public consultation.

The latest draft of the National Strategy for the Development of Culture integrates youth within its strategic framework, and among other documents, aligns with the National Youth Strategy 2023–2027. The draft strategy positions youth as an integral part of the future cultural system. In the introductory section, it identifies the promotion of shared values through cultural practices that connect different generations as one of its key policy directions. This commitment is reinforced in the strategic vision, which envisages that by 2030 the cultural system of the Republic of North Macedonia will be inclusive of all citizens, regardless of their ethnic, social, gender, or generational background.

Treatment of youth varies across the **five priority areas** of the draft strategy. While references to young people are more present in several parts of the narrative framework, these are not consistently matched by corresponding measures and activities in the Action Plan. This results in a discrepancy between stated strategic commitments and their operationalisation.

Youth is addressed most explicitly under **Priority Area 1**, "Encouraging and Nurturing the Quality and Diversity of Creative Expressions in the Arts," which identifies support for young authors and artists as essential to raising a new generation of cultural professionals who build their future in the country. The single measure, "Development of Creative Programmes for Young

5 Violeta Kachakova and Biljana Tanurovska–Kjulavkovski both served as national consultants to the Ministry of Culture and members of the working group responsible for drafting the National Strategy for the Development of Culture in the Republic of North Macedonia 2023–2027.

People," defines one objective centred on the education of young people and their integration into the creation and practice of cultural values. Translated into the Action Plan, this objective is operationalised through a set of activities, including the creation of a digital platform for youth cultural engagement, a legal initiative on youth-oriented media content, summer schools for talented children, cultural vouchers for young people, a publishing programme for children's and youth books, production of a domestic children's or youth TV series, and a campaign to promote reading among young people.
Despite the emphasis on supporting young authors and artists as creators, these activities primarily address young people as audiences and users of cultural content. Although the strategy refers to establishing systemic mechanisms for youth participation in cultural policymaking through youth councils and open forums, the Action Plan contains no corresponding activities or nominated responsible institutions to implement this commitment.
Limited attention is also given to territorial inequalities: while the introduction of cultural vouchers is a positive measure for improving access, its impact is likely to remain concentrated in urban areas unless accompanied by investment in cultural infrastructure and programmes in smaller municipalities and rural communities.

Priority Area 2, "Protection, Preservation and Sustainable Use of Cultural Heritage," does not explicitly address young people. Neither its strategic objectives and measures nor the corresponding Action Plan include youth-specific provisions.

Priority Area 3, "Reconfiguration of governance models in culture: institutional autonomy as a basis for development," focuses on decentralisation in culture and the development of a more efficient and functional institutional system. The area addresses the need for adequate infrastructure and strengthened managerial capacities in cultural institutions. Here, the youth dimension is reflected through a single Action Plan activity envisaging the transformation of part of the cultural centres into multimedia creative centres, with the opening of creative hubs and centres for youth engagement.
This is a positive mechanism for enabling youth infrastructure in culture. Since at least three centres are envisaged to be developed within the timeframe defined in the strategy, it would have been beneficial if some preparatory activities were conducted at the beginning to assess the demographic and territorial conditions where this type of infrastructure is most needed or has the greatest potential to be developed. This is highly relevant in the context of decentralisation in culture and the need to support youth cultural development beyond major urban centres.

In Priority Area 4, "Digitalisation in Culture and Digital Transformation", young people are not explicitly addressed in the Action Plan, despite being mentioned in the narrative part as one of the key target audiences benefiting from increased access to digital cultural content. As mentioned above, digitalisation, translated into the activity of creating a digital platform for youth cultural engagement, has been integrated under Priority 1.

Priority Area 5, "Culture as a Resource for Creative, Social and Economic Development," places young people within the framework of cultural and creative industries and their role in innovation, entrepreneurship, and employment. In this regard, the priority area addresses youth through measures supporting working infrastructure for young entrepreneurs via repurposed spaces developed through public–private partnerships, as well as through strengthened cooperation between formal and non-formal education in designing and delivering programmes in creative entrepreneurship and digital skills for young creative professionals. The second commitment, operationalised through the Action Plan, envisages activities providing for the development and accreditation of programmes in creative entrepreneurship and digital skills.

Overall, the draft strategy demonstrates a clear intention to integrate youth into the cultural policy framework and aligns with the National Youth Strategy 2023–2027. However, the operationalisation of these commitments remains uneven across priority areas, with a gap between narrative references to youth and their consistent translation into concrete, structured, and territorially balanced actions within the Action Plan.

The primary support mechanism for the non-institutional cultural sector, including youth as cultural actors, consists of **annual project calls** issued by the Ministry of Culture, the City of Skopje, and various municipalities. While the Ministry's annual call is consistent, local calls vary significantly depending on the priorities and decisions of the local government in power.
The Ministry of Culture allocates funds annually through calls for projects of national interest in culture, co-funding of European and international collaboration, occasional thematic calls, and the call for the freelance artist benefits scheme. The funding is project-based and rarely covers the full cost of implementation, expecting the project holders to cover the space, technical, and human resource costs within a limited activity-based budget.

At the municipal level, support is inconsistent and often symbolic. Some municipalities issue annual calls, others fund on an ad hoc basis, and some have no public call at all, with programmes curated internally by the municipal administration.

Within these calls, beyond general references to youth in the stated priorities, there are no dedicated calls or funding schemes specifically targeting young people. The criteria used in the annual open calls are organised around categories defined by the quality of the project, human resources, financial feasibility, and artistic or cultural activity and practice, without any differentiation by age or level of professional experience in the field. As a result, all applicants are treated uniformly within a single call, regardless of whether they have decades of professional experience or are just beginning their engagement in the field. This poses a challenge both for young and emerging practitioners and for established professionals alike, as the system fails to account for the significantly different needs and starting points of different groups of cultural actors. In some calls, the criteria related to previous activity, such as in the call for cultural manifestations, set the criteria so high that they effectively block the entry of any new or emerging initiative that does not have a track record of previous editions in recent years.

While the **system of benefits for registered freelance artists exists**, its implementation presents a number of challenges for users. These include the requirement to reapply annually with extensive documentation in order to maintain the benefits, delays in the monthly transfer of contributions, the exclusion of net salary from the benefits package, and limited accessibility for disadvantaged artists, including youth, elderly artists, and those facing health challenges or maternity leave, who, for the aforementioned reasons, may not be able to demonstrate a continuous artistic practice of five years, as required. Furthermore, freelance cultural workers still remain excluded from this benefits system. With regard to young artists specifically, there are no provisions designed to stimulate self-employment and professional development in the arts for recent graduates or young artists who do not yet meet the five-year professional experience requirement for registration as a freelance artist and entering the system of benefits.

Despite the extensive network of **cultural infrastructure** at both national and local levels, representatives of the non-institutional sector, and young people in particular, do not always

have access to spaces for the realisation of their cultural programmes, and when used, often generate additional costs. In this context, the role of houses of culture must be reconsidered, with particular attention to exploring opportunities for opening their spaces and technical capacities for partnership with and use by youth initiatives, associations, and collectives. This should include provisions for the use of other existing spaces within municipalities, including public and alternative spaces, through policies and mechanisms ensuring their accessibility for youth cultural production. Additionally, at the municipal level, the establishment of new cultural spaces through public-private and public-civil partnerships should be encouraged, including, where possible, spaces dedicated specifically to youth cultural activity.

1.2 Youth policy

The **Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies**[6], adopted in 2020, represents the first systemic act to establish an institutional framework for youth participation in the Republic of North Macedonia. It defines the basic concepts related to young people, youth work, and youth policies, while simultaneously establishing mechanisms through which young people can participate in policy creation and decision-making at the national and local levels.

The Law on Culture defines the rights of young people in the field of culture and guarantees freedom of artistic expression, education in the field of culture, access to cultural content, and support for young artists. The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies creates the institutional preconditions for young people to actively participate in shaping public policies, including those in the field of culture. Hence, the extent to which young people are able to realise their rights in the sphere of culture depends not only on the existence of sector-specific mechanisms and programmes, but also on the application of the youth participation mechanisms envisaged by the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies. In this sense, the implementation of the two laws should be examined through an intersectoral lens.

In this context, Youth Centres, as envisaged by the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, can function as spaces for youth cultural production and for presentation of cultural content for young people. Youth Offices can serve as the primary point of access for young people at the local level, functioning as places for submitting cultural initiatives and highlighting youth cultural needs and the challenges they face in accessing cultural content.
Youth Umbrella Organisations can advocate the interests of young people and participate in the development of public policies, including those in the field of culture. At the local level, Local Youth Councils, through their advisory role in the preparation of Local Youth Strategies, constitute a mechanism through which the cultural needs and priorities of young people can be integrated into local policies.

The National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM) continuously monitors the implementation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies through regular monitoring reports. The 2025 report[7] indicates that implementation of the Law continues to be accompanied by numerous challenges, including ambiguities in the legal text, limited resources, and a lack of monitoring mechanisms.

6 Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 10, 16.01.2020

7 NYCM, "Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies for 2025", https://www.nms.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/NMSM-MONITORING-IZVESHTAJ-2025-MK.pdf

The report also identifies the reorganisation of the state administration as an additional challenge, whereby the competencies of the former Agency for Youth and Sport are to be transferred to the newly established Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth. It states that the transfer of competencies has not yet been fully completed, owing to the need for amendments to the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, the procedure for which is still pending before Parliament.
With regard to youth participation, the report notes that the National Youth Assembly and the National Advisory Body for Youth Policies have not yet been established. At the same time, a decline in the number of Local Youth Councils is observed, pointing to challenges in the establishment and maintenance of these youth participation mechanisms[8] at the local level. The number of Youth Centres and Youth Offices has likewise decreased compared to previous years. On the other hand, a moderate increase is recorded in the number of appointed youth officers in municipalities, indicating more consistent fulfilment of this legal obligation by the institutions concerned.

The **National Youth Strategy 2023–2027**[9] (hereinafter: the NYS) is a strategic document that sets out the medium-term goals and priorities for the development of youth policies and the advancement of youth interests in the Republic of North Macedonia.
The methodology for developing the NYS involved a broad participatory process[10] with approximately 1,300 participants, achieved through the engagement of young people and relevant state institutions. Within the NYS, culture is treated as a distinct priority-thematic area[11], under which medium-term strategic goals and measures were developed, with their implementation monitored through periodic action plans.

The findings of the Youth Trends Research conducted by the Agency for Youth and Sport (2022), together with the national report "Youth Needs and the Visibility of Youth Programmes in the Field of Culture in North Macedonia" (Mitrović, D., The Union for Youth Work, 2022), provided insight into the existing situation and served as a starting point for the work of the thematic working group on culture. The strategic goals and measures in the culture area were defined through a participatory process involving the members of the working group, and were subsequently subject to broader consultative processes prior to their finalisation.

Although 85.7% of young people consider culture important to their development and quality of life, their actual participation in cultural and artistic activities remains low, at just 33.7%. This gap is not due to lack of interest, since 77.6% expressed strong willingness to participate more if given the right opportunities. Participation levels are shaped largely by local conditions, particularly the availability of cultural spaces and content. This can be a significant barrier, since

8 Youth Centres represent important infrastructure for youth participation and can also serve as valuable resources for cultural activities. According to the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, each municipality was required to establish a Youth Centre within five years from the law entry into force, a period that ended in January 2025. According to the 2025 monitoring data, a total of 13 Youth Centres (16,05%) are currently operating in North Macedonia.

9 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 204, 29.09.2023

10 The process included preparatory research on youth trends and working groups for each of the eight priority areas, involving youth officers, youth associations, youth umbrella organizations, and representatives of local youth. Additional consultative processes were carried out with secondary school students from across the country, youth umbrella organizations, student representative bodies, youth wings of political parties, and the Club for Youth Issues and Policies within the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia.

11 Violeta Kachakova served as a national consultant to the Agency for Youth and Sports, engaged through UNFPA to lead the development of the thematic area "Culture" of the National Youth Strategy. She led the overall process, including mentoring and facilitating the thematic working group, conducting the situational analysis, drafting the strategic framework with its objectives and measures, and participating in the consultation process with relevant institutions, stakeholders, and youth representatives.

39.8% of young people report that cultural content is rarely available where they live. Limited access to information about existing cultural offerings, and their low visibility, is likewise cited as a major factor behind the unsatisfactory cultural offer.

In this context, the thematic area "Culture" aims to establish mechanisms that enable young people to participate as creators of cultural policy and cultural content, as active participants in cultural programmes, and as audiences. This involves providing accessible infrastructure, such as spaces where young people can work, create, and engage with cultural content, along with opportunities for contemporary education and professional development in the field. The strategy also recognises the value of fostering cooperation among young people, both locally and internationally, as a means of building cohesive communities.

For instance, the low level of youth participation in creating cultural programmes and policies is directly addressed through **Strategic Goal 1**, which envisages the involvement of young people in creating integrative and inclusive cultural policies at the national and local levels, as well as advancing the system for financing youth cultural production and cooperation through expanding existing support mechanisms and introducing new ones. The measure for establishing an Information and Technical Support Service for young people contributes to supporting the work and fostering networking and cooperation among young people in the field of culture in a national and international context.

The gap between the expressed interest for participation in cultural and artistic activities (77.6%) and the actual rate of active participation (33.7%) is targeted by **Strategic Goal 2**, through measures aimed at increasing the accessibility of existing infrastructure, as well as developing new models (public-private partnerships) for creating spaces for youth cultural and artistic production and presentation. This goal also addresses digital tools and platforms as opportunities for creative expression and innovation among young people.

Strategic Goals 3 and 4 address a structural challenge stemming from the low level of professionalization and employment of young people in the cultural sector, through the introduction of quotas in formal education aligned with labour market opportunities, incentives for self-employment through the system of benefits for freelance artists, the modernization of educational programmes in line with European educational trends, and the introduction of a system for validating and certification of the knowledge acquired though non-formal educational programmes. In this way, these goals create the preconditions for the long-term sustainability of youth career development in culture.

Finally, **Strategic Goal 5** directly targets the problem of unequal access to cultural content, identified through the high percentage of young people (39.8%) lacking an adequate cultural offer in their place of residence, as well as the highly ranked problem of the inaccessibility and low visibility of information in this field. Through the establishment of sustainable digital channels, the adaptation of content for persons with disabilities and members of different communities, and targeted measures to increase the cultural offer in rural areas and to involve NEET youth in the field of culture, this goal offers inclusive mechanisms for all categories of young people, regardless of demographic background, gender, social origin, religion, or other forms of affiliation.

The 2025 annual monitoring report by the NYCM also addresses the implementation of the NYS. According to its findings, the evaluation of the strategy's implementation through the 2023–2025 Action Plan shows a relatively low level of execution, with only slightly over 20% of the planned activities fully implemented. During 2025, a new Action Plan for the 2026–

2027 period was drafted; however, at the time the report was prepared, it had not yet been adopted and remained under government procedure. On the other hand, at the local level, the report notes a certain increase in the number of municipalities that have adopted local youth strategies, indicating a gradual strengthening of local institutional capacity for implementing youth policies.

2. CIVIL SOCIETY ART AND CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA: STRUCTURES, PRACTICES, AND CONDITIONS OF WORK

This part of the research presents the results of the survey "Mapping Grassroots Arts and Culture Organisations Working With/For Youth," complemented by additional context-specific conditions of work of the independent art and cultural organisations in North Macedonia.

The survey was carried out simultaneously in Poland, Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Germany, North Macedonia, and Turkey to generate comparable data on how arts and culture civil society organisations across Europe operate, the values that shape their work, and how their engagement with and for young people supports civic life, community wellbeing, and democratic participation. These findings provide a strong knowledge base to inform future European-level policies, programmes, and capacity-building initiatives.
The results, along with the accompanying sector-specific information, are organised into several thematic sections that follow the structure of the survey.

The representative sample

The analysis is based on a representative sample of **19 organisations working in the arts and culture sector across three cities in North Macedonia.** The questionnaire was distributed across the country; however, only 19 organisations responded, as they have more continuous and developed programmes. Most organisations are based in the capital, Skopje (78.9%), while Struga (10.5%) and Bitola (10.5%) each account for a smaller share of the sample, with 2 organisations per city. This distribution corresponds to the country's highly centralised cultural ecosystem, where the majority of independent arts and culture organisations are concentrated in Skopje. At the same time, it reflects the continued presence of active local cultural organisations in other cities, including Struga and Bitola.

The sample comprises the following organisations: Press to Exit Project Space, MakeDox – Creative Documentary Film Festival, Contemporary Art Center, Tiiiit! Inc., Association for Affirmation of Art-FLUCTUS, Faculty of Things That Can't Be Learned-FRU, Kontrapunkt, Public Room, Centre for Social Innovations Blink 42-21, Password Production, Schtrich, Presvrt-Association for the Affirmation of Theatre, Interart Cultural Center, Atrium, and Lokomotiva-Centre for New Initiatives in Arts and Culture (Skopje); Initiative for Independent Cultural Activism-INKA and Bager Genesis 2.0 (Struga); and Youth Cultural Centre and Intimate Theatre (Bitola).

Legal status and independence

Arts and culture organisations in North Macedonia are mostly established as civil society organisations, although some operate under other legal forms, including limited liability companies (primarily in the theatre, publishing, and music sectors), private cultural institutions,

or sole proprietorships used by freelance artists. All these legal forms are creating the grassroots sector, as well as informal initiatives. The sector is characterised by a high degree of organisational autonomy, with most organisations operating independently in their governance, decision-making, and programming, without formal affiliation to public authorities, state institutions, foundations, or private businesses.

An exception from the context is the Socio-Cultural Centre Jadro, a public cultural institution established through a public–civil partnership and co-founded by the Centar Municipality, Skopje and the Jadro Association of Independent Cultural Scene.

The survey results reflect this broader national landscape. Nearly all participating organisations are registered as civil society organisations, with only one respondent, Password Production, operating as a private limited liability company. Almost all organisations identify themselves as fully independent with no involvement of public institutions, government bodies, or commercial actors in their governance or strategic decision-making.

Year of founding and reasons for emergence

The independent cultural sector in North Macedonia has served as an important platform for contemporary artistic production, critical discourse, and civic engagement since the mid-1990s. The organisations included in the sample were founded between 1996 and 2021, reflecting three decades of development within the country's independent arts and culture sector.
Dynamics of their establishment vary in different periods. Only 15.8% were founded in the 1990s, followed by 26.3% in the 2000s, while nearly half (47.4%) emerged during the 2010s, representing a period of noticeable development of independent cultural organisations. A further 10.5% were established in the early 2020s.

Founding Year	Number of Organisations	%
1990s (1990–1999)	3	15.8%
2000s (2000–2009)	5	26.3%
2010s (2010 - 2019)	9	47.4%
2020s (2020 - present)	2	10.5%

The organisations were also asked about the reasons for their creation. 52.6% stated both as equally important, "Artistic and cultural reasons" as much as "Political, civic, social reasons", while 47.4% answered solely "Artistic and cultural reasons".

Organisational structure and governance

As civil society organisations are the most applied legal form within North Macedonia's independent cultural sector, they operate under the Law on Associations and Foundations, accompanied by individual statutes that define their governance structures and bodies. In civil society organisations, the Assembly, comprising the organisation's members, is the highest decision-making body. The survey reflects this legal framework. Most organisations (78.9%) describe their governance as horizontal or collective, with decisions on programming, strategy, and activities taken collaboratively by members. Nevertheless, statutes allow organisations to frame governance to their operational needs. As a result, 10.5% of respondents answered having

hierarchical governance, while another 10.5% combine collective and hierarchical approaches, depending on the type of decision.

Governance model	Horizontal / Collective	%
Horizontal / Collective	15	78.9%
Vertical / Hierarchical	2	10.5%
Mixed / Combined	2	10.5%

Several organisations in the sample, including Kontrapunkt, Lokomotiva, FRU, Tiiiit! Inc., FLUCTUS, Presvrt, and INKA Struga, illustrate how independent artistic initiatives build their own governance systems within civil society organisations to sustain cultural production, particularly outside formal public institutions.

Governance structures in these organisations are generally horizontal or mixed. Even where formal organisational models give certain responsibilities to specific governing bodies or individuals, decision-making in practice tends to be decentralised through the sharing of information and responsibilities among small core teams. Lokomotiva, FRU, and Kontrapunkt, for example, operate through collaborative decision-making processes that emphasise collective knowledge production, shared responsibility, and shared resources.

Rather than functioning as conventional hierarchical institutions, many of these initiatives act as platforms or cultural hubs that coordinate artistic production, educational programmes, research activities, and public events through flexible, project-based collaboration. This platform-based structure allows organisations to mobilise interdisciplinary practices and create temporary spaces for artistic and civic exchange. At the same time, this flexible organisational model reflects the broader post-socialist transformation of cultural infrastructure in the region, where independent cultural production increasingly relies on self-organisation and networked collaboration rather than stable institutional frameworks, further explained in the following section of the analysis.

Income sources, annual budgets and the project-based cultural economy

The independent cultural sector in North Macedonia is mainly self-organised and financed through diversified funding sources, primarily on a project basis. Public funding from national and local authorities is generally insufficient, inconsistent, and allocated on an annual basis, leaving organisations without adequate support to cover their operational structures and personnel costs. The financial sustainability of most organisations is highly grant-dependent and relies on hybrid funding models combining national cultural grants, municipal support, international foundations, and European Union programmes such as Creative Europe, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, CERV, including small grants from the Goethe-Institut, or other Embassy programmes.

Funding diversification through earned income, private philanthropy, or alternative financing models is limited. This situation reflects the broader national context. The business sector rarely recognises independent cultural organisations as strategic partners, partly because their work is perceived as addressing specialised rather than mass audiences, and partly because existing policy instruments provide little incentive for private investment in culture. In particular, the current Law on Sponsorship and Donations offers limited benefits while imposing considerable administrative obligations on companies wishing to support cultural initiatives.

Furthermore, not all programmes are designed to generate income, and even when admission fees are charged, audiences continue to expect independent cultural events to be free of charge or have a very low price. This expectation is also shaped by the country's low living standard, particularly among young people and unemployed citizens, limiting organisations' ability to generate sustainable income through ticket sales or participation fees.

An analysis of the survey data shows that national public grants are the most widely used funding source, at 84.2%. Almost all organisations rely on national public funding. However, this support is insufficient to meet the financial needs of programme implementation for those organisations that do not work ad hoc, but have developed programmes, and is therefore combined with other funding sources. European Union grants are used by 68.4% of organisations, while 57.9% receive support from local or regional public authorities. Private foundations are used by 31.6% of organisations, while corporate sponsorship and ticket fees or other direct income from activities take a portion of 26.3%. The organisations combine multiple funding sources rather than relying on a single source. On average, each organisation has over three income sources, which lowers financial risk. However, the basic funding structure remains relatively homogeneous, as the majority of organisations continue to depend primarily on national and European public grants. In other words, diversification exists in the number of funding sources rather than in the types of funding available.

Funding source	Number of Organisations	%
National public grants	16	84.2%
EU public grants	13	68.4%
Local/regional public grants	11	57.9%
Private foundations	6	31.6%
Corporate sponsorship	5	26.3%
Tiket fees/direc income	5	26.3%
Crowfunding/individual donations	1	5.3%
Embassies/cultural rapresentatives	1	5.3%
Own production revenue	1	5.3%

Number of sources	Number of Organisations	%
1 source	2	10.5%
2 sources	2	10.5%
3 sources	8	42.1%
4 sources	6	31.6%
5 sources	1	5.3%

This pattern is also reflected in the organisational structures. Organisations such as MakeDox, Lokomotiva, Kontrapunkt, Interart Cultural Center, FRU, the Contemporary Art Center, Press to Exit, and Password Production frequently participate in international cultural networks and transnational collaborations, enabling them to access European funding programmes. Other initiatives such as Atrium, Presvrt, and Intimate Theatre tend to rely on a combination of project grants, partnerships, and ticket or direct income from activities.

While this mix of funding sources enables organisations to maintain international cooperation, artistic mobility, and programme continuity, the predominance of project-based funding generates structural instability. Funding is generally temporary and linked to single projects rather than long-term institutional development, making sustainable organisational planning and strategic development difficult. This financial structure reflects broader transformations in contemporary cultural production, where artistic work is increasingly embedded within what cultural theorists describe as a **project-based cultural economy.**

Annual budget sizes are modest and reflect the small-scale, grassroots character of the sector. The majority of organisations (57.9%) operate with an annual budget of less than €50,000. A further 15.8% report annual budgets between €50,000 and €100,000, while progressively fewer organisations fall into higher budget categories: 10.5% operate with budgets between €100,000 and €250,000, another 10.5% between €250,000 and €500,000, and only one organisation (5.3%) reports an annual budget between €500,000 and €1 million.

Annual budget	Number of Organisations	%
Under €50,000	11	57.9%
€50,000 - 100,000	3	15.8%
€100,000–250,000	2	10.5%
€250,000–500,000	2	10.5%
€500,000–1 million	1	5.3%

These findings present a sector composed predominantly of small organisations that significantly rely on public grant funding and operate with limited, and often precarious, financial resources. Only a small number of organisations have reached a medium to large scale operational capacity.

Organisational scale, labour conditions and personnel

The surveyed organisations are mainly small, with 89.5% working with fewer than 10 staff members, while only two organisations (Bager Genesis 2.0 and Public Room) report between 10 and 30 staff members (10.5%). No organisation in the sample exceeds 30 staff members.

Staff	Number of Organisations	%
Fewer than 10 staff members	17	89.5%
10 - 13 staff members	2	10.5%
More than 30 staff members	0	0%

Most organisations work with small core teams, often consisting of only a few permanent members responsible for programming, project development, administration, organisational development, partnership building, and fundraising. The implementation of projects frequently relies on networks of freelance collaborators, artists, volunteers, and partner organisations.

The survey results show that paid staff constitute the core of organisational work. **Full-time and part-time staff** are considered essential in the sector, with 84.2% of organisations rating them as "Very important." **External collaborators** are similarly highly valued, with 78.9% rating

them "Very important" and the remaining 21.1% "Important." **Partner organisations** also play a significant role, with 68.4% of respondents rating them "Very Important", 26.3% "Important" and only one organisation (5.3%) expressing a neutral assessment.

Volunteers present a different picture. Only 21.1% of organisations consider them "Very important," while 31.6% rate them "Important." An important share gives lower significance to volunteer engagement, with 26.3% reporting a neutral assessment, 15.8% indicating low importance, and 5.3% stating that volunteers are "Not at all important." These results show that volunteers play a peripheral or event-specific role, particularly during festivals and larger public events, rather than being a core member of day-to-day organisational work. This reflects the increasingly project-based and professionalised character of independent cultural production in North Macedonia, where artistic and organisational activities are developed by the core staff, external experts, and long-term collaborative networks rather than volunteers.

Importance	Volunteers	Full-time/ Part-time staff	Eternal Collaborators	Partner Organisations
Very important	21.1% (4)	84.2%(16)	78.9% (15)	68.4% (13)
Important	31.6% (6)	5.3% (1)	21.1% (4)	26.3% (5)
Neutral	26.3% (5)	10.5% (2)	0% (0)	5.3% (1)
Low importance	15.8% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Not at all important	5.3% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)

This labour model enables organisations to mobilise diverse expertise and sustain interdisciplinary programming. At the same time, it reinforces the precarious nature of cultural labour, as individuals frequently combine multiple professional roles, including artistic practice, curating, teaching, project management, cultural advocacy, research, and administration. In this context, civil society organisations function not only as producers of artistic and cultural content but also as platforms for knowledge production, exchange, capacity building, professional development, and cultural networking.

The organisational staff reflects these structural conditions. Some team members are employed in public institutions, universities, or other organisations while working part-time on projects within independent cultural organisations. Only a small number are employed directly by the organisations or work as full-time self-employed cultural professionals. As a result, organisational teams often lack permanence and long-term stability, making staff sustainability one of the sector's key structural challenges. In recent years, this situation has been worsened by the outflow of experienced cultural workers to better-paid sectors, particularly the IT industry and other parts of the civil society sector, where more stable employment conditions and higher salaries are available.

Art practice and civic/democratic themes as part of the mission and core activities

Art practices

The sample is highly interdisciplinary: 84.2% of organisations work across two or more artistic disciplines, with only 15.8% concentrating on a single discipline. The most common areas of practice are combined arts (57.9%), theatre (52.6%), and visual arts (42.1%), followed by film and audiovisual and music (26.3% each). Smaller shares of organisations work in dance (15.8%), museums and heritage (10.5%), and literature (10.5%), while several organisations also described interdisciplinary practices at the intersection of art, technology, innovation, activism,

and design. If we want to look more closely at some of the sampled organisations' practices:

- MakeDox focuses on documentary film and audiovisual storytelling
- FRU operates at the intersection of public space, experimental knowledge production, and contemporary art
- Tiiiit!Inc. develops feminist artistic and educational programmes
- Kontrapunkt presents theoretical perspectives in arts and culture, and publishes in the same direction
- Lokomotiva works through interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge production in contemporary dance, performance, curatorial practice, research and educational programmes
- Interart Cultural Center supports dance production and presentation
- Press to Exit Project Space, Public Room, and Contemporary Art Center facilitate visual arts research, exhibitions, and interdisciplinary artistic experimentation
- INKA Struga develops cross-disciplinary programmes, with a focus on collaborative residencies
- MKC Bitola works on cross-disciplinary activities involving youth and culture.

Addressed civic and democratic themes

This interdisciplinary character extends to the civic and democratic content of the organisations. Two clear thematic clusters emerge: one centred on "education and learning" and "diversity, equity and inclusion", and a smaller but consistent cluster focused on "social justice and democracy" and "community leadership and empowerment", positioning art as a medium for democratic and social engagement, thus context-related. Many organisations combine artistic production with discursive and educational programming, including workshops, residencies, public discussions, exhibitions, festivals, and publications. This hybrid programming model reflects a shift from traditional programming for artistic production, toward process-oriented cultural practices that emphasise collaboration, research, and production of knowledge. Organisations such as Blink 42-21, INKA Struga, Bager Genesis 2.0 and FRU exemplify this, applying socially engaged art practices that connect artistic production directly with community development and civic participation.

Organisational missions, activities and democratic engagement

From the answers, it is evident that independent cultural organisations in North Macedonia understand their work as extending beyond artistic production alone. While artistic creation remains the foundation of their activities, organisations consistently combine cultural production with education, community engagement, knowledge exchange, advocacy, and international cooperation. Rather than separating artistic and civic objectives, many respondents describe them as mutually complementary.

Additionally, organisations refer to democracy through cultural practices. Participation, dialogue, critical thinking, freedom of expression, collaboration, and inclusion are identified as values embedded in artistic processes, educational activities, and community-based work. In this sense, arts and culture are understood as means for strengthening civic agency and democratic participation rather than simply as part of the cultural production.

Finally, although organisations differ in their artistic disciplines and organisational models, many share a strong commitment to working with young people. Youth engagement is articulated

not only through dedicated educational programmes, but also through mentoring, artistic experimentation, professional development, international exchange, and opportunities for collective creation. Young people are positioned not merely as audiences but as active cultural actors whose participation contributes to the work of the independent cultural sector and to democratic cultural life.

Analytical dimension	Key characteristics identified
Organisational mission	Developing contemporary artistic practices; strengthening the independent cultural scene; supporting artists; promoting independent culture; decentralisation; cultural accessibility; community development; supporting youth and emerging cultural professionals.
Core activities	Festivals, performances, exhibitions, film screenings, artist residencies, workshops, educational programmes, research, publishing, mentoring, advocacy, policy work, artistic production, community programmes, international cooperation and cultural exchange.
Civic and democratic values	Participation, inclusion, diversity, critical thinking, dialogue, freedom of expression, social justice, solidarity, decentralisation, accessibility, transparency, self-organisation, collaboration, cultural rights, and democratic participation.
Mechanisms for fostering democracy	Participatory artistic processes; non-formal education; community engagement; public debate; artistic activism; socially engaged art; collaborative knowledge production; capacity building; audience development; advocacy; creating spaces for dialogue and civic participation.
Youth dimensions	Professional development for emerging artists; workshops; mentoring; artist residencies; non-formal education; youth participation in cultural production; audience development; international mobility; opportunities for experimentation, collaboration, and leadership.

Space and its civic and political function

Regarding physical access to space, the majority of organisations (57.9%) operate from rented premises, reflecting the limited ownership of cultural infrastructure within the independent cultural sector. A smaller share access space through more favourable arrangements: 10.5% use premises provided free of charge by a private body, while another 10.5% own their space. One organisation (5.3%) operates from premises provided free of charge by a public body, one combines rented office space with a mobile gallery developed in cooperation with the Centar Municipality (5.3%), one is based within a space established through a formal public–civil partnership (5.3%), and one organisation (5.3%) reports having no permanent space.

Category	Number of Organisations	%
Rent space from public/private entities	11	57.9%
Own space	2	10.5%
Space provided free of charge by a private body	2	10.5%
Space provided free of charge by a public body	1	5.3%
Used space in centre based on Public–civil partnership	1	5.3%
Hybrid model (rent office + own/gallery space)	1	5.3%
No permanent space	1	5.3%

Interpreting the civic function of space

The sample organisations in various ways relate to their physical space and its function. At one end, several organisations treat space as an explicitly political and civic instrument. Press to Exit Project Space operates within the Socio-Cultural Space "Centar-Jadro," a space established through a public–civil partnership between the Association of independent cultural scene and the Centar Municipality, created to address the needs of the independent culture and to challenge existing power structures and strengthen the sector's democratic role. Contemporary Art Center positions its mobile gallery as a civic hub whose "political goal" is to mobilise progressive publics and support civic initiatives, grassroots activists, and informal groups addressing social, environmental, human rights, and democratic issues. INKA Struga frames its rented studio space as "a deliberate civic hub that decentralises culture," turning passive residents into active citizens through creative collaboration. Youth Cultural Center Bitola rents a large space in the city centre, used for cultural and multimedia events as an alternative space for community gathering.

Other organisations describe a more implicit civic function of the space. Interart Cultural Center states that their space has no explicit political goals, but that its work "naturally has a civic dimension" by creating spaces where people meet and engage with social and cultural topics. Intimate Theatre Bitola describes its space simply as "an oasis for free speech of artists."

A third group, including Kontrapunkt, Atrium, and Presvrt, operates from rented space and programme-related venues, and frames this condition as shaping its civic approach. Schtrich operates nomadically in a similar way, explaining that its political and civic goals are not tied to a specific location but are expressed through the themes it addresses and the communities it works with.

Lokomotiva, currently operating from an administrative office within the Youth Cultural Centre Skopje, identifies the establishment of a permanent, autonomous space as one of its long-term strategic goals, arguing that this would enable the organisation to "strengthen its civic and political role more structurally."

A smaller number of organisations use their space in functional terms, without an articulated civic dimension. Blink 42-21 notes that its space is "used only as offices," while Password Production currently uses its space as an office, although it aspires to convert it into a gathering space for local musicians and artists. One organisation, FLUCTUS, explicitly states that its space carries no political goals at all.

Finally, there are organisations whose spaces carry historical or symbolic significance. MakeDox is closely associated with its main festival venue, the 16th-century Kurshumli An. FRU operates from the Cinema in the Railway Residential Building, a socialist-era collective housing complex whose modernist architecture and communal design relate to the organisation's culture and education programme which includes plans to reconstruct and reactivate the cinema's space. Tiiiit! Inc. notes its location in Vera Jocić Park, named after the Yugoslav partisan and People's Hero of Yugoslavia Vera Jocić, as an "accidental" yet meaningful civic backdrop to its feminist programming.

Access to cultural infrastructure remains a major challenge for independent cultural organisations in North Macedonia. Despite these limitations, many organisations transform available spaces into temporary cultural spaces that enable artistic experimentation and community engagement. In doing so, they contribute to the creation of alternative cultural geographies by activating urban and social spaces that might otherwise remain disconnected from contemporary cultural production. At the same time, most organisations continue to advocate for permanent spaces of their own, recognising that stable infrastructure would strengthen their organisational capacity and enable the long-term sustainability of their programmes.

Evaluation Practices

The answers suggest that evaluation practices in the independent cultural sector remain mainly informal. 68.4% evaluate their activities generally through conversations with participants, audiences, collaborators, or community members. Formal evaluation methods are used by a small number of organisations, while individual organisations also report using attendance data, testimonials, or focus-group discussions. The responses also indicate differences in organisational capacity. While most organisations rely on flexible and experience-based feedback, Lokomotiva describes a more comprehensive evaluation approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods, including participant surveys, internal reflection meetings, and continuous dialogue with stakeholders, alongside plans to establish a more systematic monitoring and evaluation framework. On the other hand, one organisation reports that it does not conduct evaluation due to limited time and capacity. Overall, the responses suggest that evaluation is recognised as important but is usually implemented through informal practices rather than structured monitoring systems. This also reflects the broader project-based operating environment of the independent cultural sector in North Macedonia.

Evaluation approach	Number of Organisations	%
Informal conversations/discussions	13	68.4%
Surveys/questionnaires	2	10.5%
Testimonials and informal focus groups	1	5.3%
Attendance/audience turnout	1	5.3%
Mixed evaluation methods (surveys, feedback, internal reflection, informal dialogue)	1	5.3%
No evaluation	1	5.3%

From audiences to active participants: the role of young people in cultural organisations

Why working with young people?

Most organisations describe youth engagement as closely related to capacity building and growing self-confidence. Press to Exit, for instance, frames its objective as strengthening "capacities and self-assurance," while FLUCTUS, Bager Genesis 2.0, and Interart Cultural Center similarly describe helping young people grow into "confident" cultural actors and participants. While some organisations focus on education and professional development, such as MakeDox and Youth Cultural Center Bitola, others place greater emphasis on youth agency, leadership, civic awareness, and the role of culture as a tool for critical thinking and social engagement. INKA Struga, Contemporary Art Center, Blink 42-21, Schtrich, Presvrt, and Atrium all frame their objectives around building critical thinking, civic agency, or democratic participation among young people. Lokomotiva bridges both by combining professional development for young artists and cultural workers with a focus on critical reflection, cultural policy awareness, and civic engagement. What is common across these different emphases is a shared goal: supporting youth in becoming active cultural actors rather than passive recipients of Wmes.

Forms of participation and involvement

The objectives stated earlier can be seen in some of the roles of youth in organisations. The most usual form of youth participation is as audiences or as participants in cultural programmes. Still, it is often combined with more active roles such as volunteering, co-creation, project

leadership, and collaboration in programme development. A significant number of organisations involve young people as project leaders or co-creators, indicating a shift towards participatory models where young people contribute to developing artistic programmes and organisational activities. In several cases, young people are also included in governance and decision-making structures, meaning that some organisations have advanced programme-based engagement to more structural forms of youth participation. To sum up, the responses indicate a variety of involvement, from participation in activities to roles of collaborators, emerging professionals, and contributors to organisational development. This presents an ongoing transition of youth participation from being audience to becoming partner, co-producer and member of the governing structure.

The scale and significance of youth involvement

Youth involvement in the activities of the organisations is important, although there are differences in the level of youth involvement across different organisations. 57.9% answered that young people under 30 represent 26–50% of their members or participants, 21.1% answered a youth participation rate of 10–25%, while 21.1% answered that young people are more than 50% of their participants.

Proportion of members/participants under 30	Number of Organisations	%
10–25%	4	21.1%
26–50%	11	57.9%
More than 50%	4	21.1%

These numbers, along with the qualitative data, show that youth participation is more than sporadic involvement and is an important part of the organisations' activities.

Fostering civic and democratic participation among young people: practices and challenges

Commitment to fostering civic and democratic participation

Most organisations see promoting civic or democratic participation among young people as an essential part of their mission. 12 out of 19 organisations noted it as either a main mission or an important goal.

Civic/democratic participation among youth	Number of Organisations	%
Central mission	3	15.8%
Important goal	9	47.4%
Minor goal	2	10.5%
Work with/for youth, but civic/democratic participation is not an explicit goal	3	15.8%
Other / practice-based democratic approach	1	5.3%
No clear response category	1	5.3%

The answers suggest that youth engagement is a significant element. While only a small

number view the promotion of democratic participation as their specific goal, a good number of organisations contribute to civic development indirectly through artistic practices, education, dialogue, mentoring, and creating spaces for young people to express opinions, collaborate, and engage with social and cultural issues.

Practices supporting civic and democratic participation

The activities reported by organisations show that civic and democratic participation is rarely addressed through formal civic education or just activism programmes. Instead, organisations incorporate democratic values into artistic and cultural activities. They use creative practice as the main way for young people to experience participation. These activities promote collaboration, debate, critical reflection, negotiation of different perspectives, and collective responses to social and community issues, rather than just focusing on institutional knowledge or political literacy.

Organisations like Lokomotiva, FRU, Tiiiit! Inc., INKA Struga, and the Youth Cultural Center Bitola have created educational programmes that link artistic practice with civic learning. Youth participation in these initiatives often goes beyond audience development to involve active collaboration in artistic production, cultural programming, and sometimes even organisational processes. These participatory models represent broader methods of cultural education that highlight critical thinking, collective learning, dialogue, and civic awareness.

Challenges in fostering civic and democratic participation

Organisations recognise several interconnected challenges that hinder young people's ongoing civic and democratic involvement. The most common issue is youth disengagement, shown by feelings of apathy, political fatigue, low trust in institutions, and doubts about the effectiveness of civic participation. Many organisations also struggle to keep young people committed for the long term, especially in a context marked by social uncertainty, economic instability, and the migration of young people to larger cities or other countries. Structural barriers present another challenge. Respondents point to limited, project-based funding, inadequate cultural infrastructure, unequal access to cultural opportunities, especially outside major urban areas, and the absence of long-term support for youth programmes. A smaller number of organisations point to additional factors: weaknesses in the public education system limiting young people's early exposure to culture; or not substantial involvement in cultural activities, but very basic; the impact of misinformation and superficial digital content; and a lack of intergenerational activities and meaningful dialogue between generations as a barrier to sustained engagement. Overall, the findings indicate that the main challenges do not stem from cultural organisations' desire to promote civic and democratic participation. Instead, these challenges arise from broader structural conditions that affect young people's chances for ongoing involvement. In response, many organisations aim to address these obstacles by creating inclusive, participatory, and engaging environments that build trust, foster dialogue, and link civic engagement to young people's daily lives through artistic and cultural practices.

Partnerships with Educational Institutions and Youth Organisations

Collaboration with schools, universities, youth organisations, and other educational institutions is a common practice among the surveyed organisations. 15 of the 19 organisations (78.9%) answered that they maintain these partnerships. Only 4 (21.1%) indicated that they currently do not collaborate with educational institutions. These results confirm that cooperation with the education sector enables cultural organisations to integrate their activities into broader educational and community contexts.

From the responses, we can notice three types of partnership models. First, organisations collaborate with schools and universities to increase access to culture by introducing young people to artistic practices through workshops, performances, screenings, festivals, and educational visits, for example, MakeDox, Press to Exit Project Space. Second, the established partnerships serve as platforms for non-formal learning, where artistic practice is combined with mentoring, interdisciplinary research, professional training, and skills development. Organisations such as Lokomotiva, FRU, and Interart Cultural Center illustrate this approach by connecting higher education with artistic research, production, and international exchange. Third, several organisations extend collaboration beyond educational institutions by working with youth organisations, volunteer networks, municipalities, and community partners, creating broader ecosystems for youth participation, for example INKA Struga, Password Production, and Youth Cultural Center Bitola.

These results suggest that independent cultural organisations complement rather than reproduce formal education. Instead of delivering curriculum-based knowledge, they provide learning environments based on experimentation, collaboration, artistic production, and direct engagement with cultural practice. In doing so, they expand opportunities that are often missing from formal education, connecting young people with professional cultural networks, interdisciplinary learning, and practical experience. Consequently, the results show that partnerships with educational institutions function less as institutional cooperation and more as a strategy for connecting education, culture, and community participation. Through these collaborations, cultural organisations strengthen access to cultural participation while supporting paths for long-term learning, professional development, and engagement in contemporary cultural life.

Conclusion of the analyses

The results of the overall survey expose the independent arts and culture sector in North Macedonia as a small-scale, self-organised, socially engaged ecosystem, shaped as much by its structural constraints as by its values.

Structurally, the sector is characterised by its independence and collective decision-making, with governance that is rarely purely hierarchical, and more often shared or combined with hierarchical elements, and it operates with almost no formal ties to public or private bodies. This autonomy, however, coexists with precarity: the sector remains dependent on public grant funding, particularly from national and European sources, and while organisations disperse this dependency by using multiple funding sources, the financial base remains narrow rather than diversified. Budgets are modest, working teams are small, and labour is distributed across a professionalised network of core staff, external collaborators, and partner organisations, while volunteer involvement remains mainly programme-related. Physical space as working or programme-implementing infrastructure follows the same pattern of adaptation to limited conditions, since most organisations rent or borrow the spaces they use, and stable, dedicated cultural infrastructure is rather the exception than the rule.

Despite these constraints, the sector demonstrates a strong and consistent artistic and civic identity. The practice is evidently interdisciplinary, moving across artistic forms rather than single disciplines, and this same plurality extends to the civic and democratic content of the work, which comprises education and learning, diversity, equity and inclusion, social justice and democracy, and community leadership and empowerment. Across mission statements and stated objectives of the surveyed organisations, art is repeatedly framed not as an end

in itself but as a significant medium for civic action and democracy or a way of creating participatory, interactive and inclusive spaces alongside the more rigid or often inaccessible formal institutions.

This civic orientation is especially visible in how organisations relate to young people. Youth involvement extends beyond the audience role, and more and more, it's been included as collaborators, co-creators, and, in some cases, participants in governance itself. Most organisations consider it important and are involved in civic and democratic engagement of youth through non-formal education, critical thinking, creative practice, dialogue, and participation in artistic and civic productions. This is reinforced by cooperation with schools, universities, and youth networks, positioning the independent cultural sector as a complement to formal education.

At the same time, the sector's evaluative and reflective practices remain mainly informal, shaped by the same resource constraints that define its overall working conditions. Most organisations engage in some form of self-assessment, mostly practised through informal conversation and level of participation, rather than structured monitoring. This presents a gap between the sector's civic aspirations and its institutional capacity to methodically and continuously track or demonstrate impact due to context-specific conditions and instability of project-based funding under which it is produced.

Finally, organisations face challenges that hinder young people's ongoing civic and democratic involvement, such as youth apathy, political disengagement, low living standards, emigration, and financial instability.

In sum, the civic aspiration of the sector exceeds institutional capacity, presenting a landscape of small, independent, collectively governed organisations, in which their cultural and artistic practices are authentic engines for democratic participation, even as they continue to operate within conditions of financial, infrastructural, and organisational fragility.

3. TOWARDS YOUTH AS CULTURAL ACTORS

The recommendations we are proposing are part of the materials[12] provided with the courtesy of the RYCO Local Branch Office in Skopje[13], which were developed as part of their activities, more precisely through two complementary participatory activities organised with the support of the local RYCO team. Altogether, the process engaged 41 participants.

The first activity was a promotional meeting with RYCO grantees, held on 6 March 2026, attended by 22 participants. RYCO and the Western Balkan Youth Cultural Fund[14] presented their programmes and activities, while the grantees shared their projects, the positive social changes achieved through RYCO's support and the importance of having a dedicated fund for developing their ideas. The discussion with participants helped identify successful practices, lessons learned and the value of continued financial and programme support.

The second activity was an advocacy event on the needs of young people in culture, held on 11 June 2026 at the Public Institution House of Culture "Kocho Racin" in Skopje and attended by 19 participants. Representatives of the independent cultural scene, education

12 We have edited part of the materials for the purpose of these analyses. However, they are integrally part of the recommendations used by RYCO
13 The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), https://www.rycowb.org/category/news/local-branch-offices/local-branch-office-skopje/
14 Western Balkans Youth Cultural Fund, https://www.rycowb.org/westernbalkansyouthculturalfund/

and media sector, as well as from the foundations, external experts, and also representatives from the Skopje European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2028 shared their current support mechanisms as well as existing policy documents and opportunities for youth and culture. At the meeting, the young people's needs at the local and national levels, as well as the need for regional programmes, mobility and exchange, were discussed.

The findings from both activities were brought together to formulate the final recommendations, which we are using here, and have consolidated them as part of this analysis, as we find them important to be further shared and disseminated.

The grantees' experiences provided practical evidence of what works, while the advocacy event enabled a broader discussion of remaining needs, policy gaps and possible support mechanisms. The resulting recommendations therefore reflect both practical experience and the jointly identified priorities of young people, cultural workers, artists, civil society organisations and experts.

Proposed set of recommendations at local and national level

1. Financial and Institutional Support

- Ensure that public funding for culture includes dedicated budgets and quotas for youth initiatives and programmes.
- Establish dedicated funds to support youth activities in culture at the local, national, and regional levels, including artistic and cultural production, mobility, and the development of cooperation projects. Establish dedicated support instruments for youth and culture (for artistic creation as well as project management) at the national and local levels. Seize the opportunity by introducing a dedicated financial programme line within ECoC Skopje 2028 and involve local authorities in developing instruments and mechanisms to advance culture and youth at the city and municipal levels
- Introduce measures to support engagement and employment of young people in cultural institutions and organisations through internship programmes, subsidies, and entry-level positions, to attract young professionals to the sector
- Strengthen decentralisation through the mandatory planning and implementation of cultural programmes with a focus on youth, in all eight regions of the country, supported through dedicated regional funding and programmes

2. Spaces and Infrastructure for Young People

- Ensure involvement of young people in the creation and development of programmes within existing cultural spaces
- Prioritise the revitalisation and accessibility of existing local cultural spaces (such as Houses of Culture with active youth programmes), rather than opening additional youth cultural centres in Skopje
- Local governments should provide accessible and functional spaces for cultural and artistic activities for young people, following successful examples from the region
- Establish mechanisms requiring public cultural institutions to make their spaces available for youth programmes and initiatives, including those that facilitate regional and international cooperation

- Development and usage of existing physical spaces (particularly Houses of Culture, Youth Centres, and Local Cultural Institutions), while also creating digital spaces for youth creativity, collaboration, and cultural production, including connections with cities across Europe

3. Youth Participation in Policy-Making

- Establish permanent mechanisms for youth participation in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of cultural policies at the local and national levels
- Ensure the representation of young people and civil society organisations in the governing and advisory bodies of cultural institutions
- Develop Local Youth Councils and Cultural Forums as platforms for dialogue between young people, institutions, and decision-makers. These is operative at the local level, where positive examples already exist, and Cultural Forums should be extended at broader regional and national levels
- Promote and effectively implement the existing mechanisms foreseen within the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies in North Macedonia

4. Education, Practice, and Capacity Building

- Modernise educational programmes to ensure they correspond to contemporary artistic practices and cultural professions
- Strengthen the presence of culture and the arts within secondary schools' education through participation-based programmes and project development activities
- Improve the system for the recognition and validation of knowledge and competences acquired outside formal education. Develop a system that links formal and non-formal education by recognising volunteer work, practical experience, participation in cultural projects, and participation in non-formal education programmes in the field of culture.
- To further develop programmes for practical work of students in the cultural institutions and the independent cultural organisations, which will be formally recognised within the education system
- Introduce elective courses, open programmes, and interdisciplinary initiatives (high school and university education) that connect culture, the arts, youth policies, civic participation, and broader social issues
- Provide continuous capacity-building opportunities for young people in cultural management, project management, cultural policy, advocacy, and artistic activism
- Strengthen the capacities of teachers and educational staff to work with young people in the field of culture, particularly in the development of projects within primary and secondary education
- Develop career guidance and mentorship programmes for young people interested in culture and the arts

5. Intersectoral Cooperation and Partnerships

- Encourage systematic cooperation between educational institutions, cultural institutions, civil society organisations, and local communities
- Develop mechanisms for sharing and aligning policies, as well as facilitating

intersectoral dialogue between culture, youth, education, economy, environment, and other relevant sectors

- Promote the sharing of resources, knowledge, and infrastructure between institutions and civil society organisations for the development of youth programmes
- Create programmes for the exchange of good practices at the national, regional, and European levels
- Establish Youth and Culture Forums that enable networking, exchange of experiences, and joint advocacy

6. Visibility and Public Presence

- Support programmes that increase the visibility of young artists and activists in the media space in cooperation with organisations that actively work in this field
- Develop and use locally available digital platforms, but also social media tools for increasing the visibility and participation of young people in public and cultural life, while prioritising new forms of connection, communication, and visibility

7. Participation in Culture and Development of Cultural Needs

- Support youth debate clubs and critical thinking programmes related to culture, democracy, and social issues
- Develop programmes and instruments for cultural participation that enable young people to be not only audiences but also creators of cultural content
- Ensure the inclusion of young people in cultural programmes implemented by institutions and civil society organisations
- Extend learning and participation in culture and the arts within the main curricula in primary and secondary education (learning about theatre, dance, film, etc.)

8. Inclusion, Social Engagement, and the Development of Socio-Cultural Values

- Support projects that promote intercultural dialogue, solidarity, acceptance of diversity, and the overcoming of stereotypes and prejudices
- Encourage cultural programmes addressing issues of public interest, such as human rights, gender equality, the green transition, sexual education, and social justice
- Ensure equal access to culture for all young people, including those from rural areas, young people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups
- Recognise culture as a key factor for social, democratic, and economic development, as well as an important tool for emancipation, education, and active citizenship

9. Systemic and Strategic Recommendations

- Establish mechanisms for coordination and alignment among policies across youth, culture, education, the economy, social development, and the environment to improve the effectiveness of planning and resource use.
- Create a national system to enable continuous research of young people's cultural needs, habits, interests, and trends, which will provide evidence for the development

of policies and programmes based on the actual needs of young people (for example, an institute for culture that will also include specific analyses on youth needs and mechanisms to support development)

- Establish mechanisms for the regular collection, analysis, and sharing of data on youth and culture among institutions, local authorities, the education sector, and civil society organisations (also, possible activity of the aforementioned institute for culture)
- Promote intergenerational solidarity, cooperation, and the participation of young people in the development and implementation of cultural policies and programmes (within the institutional programmes as well as civil society)
- Increase public investment in culture and youth through the gradual allocation of at least 2% of public expenditure
- Introduce specific support measures for youth initiatives in regions of North Macedonia that lack cultural content and infrastructure, ensuring balanced territorial development through tailored support instruments
- Strengthen regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries through joint programmes, mobility schemes, exchange of good practices
- Foster stronger connections between existing regional and international (EU) initiatives and programmes (such as RYCO, Culture Action Europe, Kooperativa, Jadro and other networks) and national youth and cultural policies, in order to build long-term social, cultural, and political capital.
- Recognise arts and culture as a public good and as an important driver of democratic development, social cohesion, critical thinking, emancipation, and the sustainable development of communities
- Ensure conditions for free artistic research, experimentation, and creation as a prerequisite for the development of innovative cultural practices and the active participation of young people in society

CONCLUSION

The research shows that youth participation in culture is shaped simultaneously by cultural and youth policies, institutional structures and mechanisms of support, the active role of independent cultural organisations, and the experiences and aspirations of young people themselves. Meaningful participation requires a connection between strategic documents and the practical conditions that enable young people to enter, contribute to, and influence cultural life.

The findings indicate that while different forms of youth engagement and collaboration already exist, their sustainability depends on stronger cooperation and coordination between the youth and cultural sectors, clearer support mechanisms, and recognition of young people as contributors to cultural development rather than only as participants or audiences. Independent cultural organisations play an important role in creating spaces for creative expression, education, and involvement, but their capacity to provide such opportunities is closely linked to the wider institutional and financial environment in which they operate.

The connection between the youth and cultural sectors remains an area with significant potential for development. Strengthening cooperation, creating sustainable mechanisms for involvement, and recognising diverse forms of youth contribution can support the development of a more open, inclusive, and dynamic cultural environment in North Macedonia.