

YOUTH DECLARATION ON INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE AND PEACEBUILDING

ADOPTED AT THE NATIONAL YOUTH FORUM: "HERE TO STAY!", MAY 21, 2026, SKOPJE, NORTH MACEDONIA

PREAMBLE

We, the young people gathered at the National Youth Forum "Here to Stay!", representing diverse backgrounds, communities, municipalities and lived experiences, assert our shared vision for a society where young people are meaningfully included in decision-making, recognized as equal partners in governance, and supported as active contributors to peacebuilding, resilience and social cohesion.

Building on the Joint Declaration on Youth Empowerment and Policy Commitment in the Western Balkans, this Declaration carries that commitment forward with a stronger focus on inclusive governance, local participation, social cohesion and peacebuilding. Young people need hope, the ability to dream, and trust in

a future ahead of them. We deserve opportunities and a strong foundation from which to build our lives — feeling safe, valued, heard and supported. Yet, in a time marked by polarization, uncertainty, social divisions, economic insecurity, environmental challenges, misinformation and repeated crises, it is becoming harder for many young people to trust institutions and imagine a better future in their own communities.

We believe there is no sustainable peace without youth. Peacebuilding must not be understood only as negotiations, mediation or formal institutional processes. Peace starts in our streets, schools, homes, youth spaces, neighborhoods, online spaces and local communities.

OUR VISION

We envision communities where young people are empowered as equal partners in decision-making, where youth councils and participation mechanisms are functional and inclusive, where institutions listen and respond to youth voices, and where diversity, dialogue and solidarity form the foundation for peaceful and democratic local communities. We envision a future where young people are not only invited to participate, but trusted to lead, co-create and build sustainable peace.

KEY COMMITMENTS AND DEMANDS

1. MOVE FROM YOUTH PARTICIPATION TO YOUTH INFLUENCE

We demand youth participation that creates real influence over decisions, budgets, policies and local priorities — included at every stage: design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, not only when institutions need symbolic consultation.

We call for:

- » Stronger implementation of the Law on Youth Participation*
- » Functional and supported local youth councils
- » Regular youth consultations
- » Youth-friendly access to information
- » Transparent feedback on how youth proposals are considered and used

2. MAKE YOUTH COUNCILS AND INSTITUTIONS ACCOUNTABLE

We demand youth councils and participation mechanisms that are active, transparent, inclusive and connected to young people's real needs.

We call for:

- » Adequate financial, technical and logistical support for local youth councils
- » Transparent procedures and regular cooperation with municipalities
- » Public reporting on youth recommendations
- » Capacity-building for youth council members
- » Monitoring of whether participation mechanisms are functional and effective

3. BUILD PEACE WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE LIVE

We demand that peacebuilding be recognized as a daily, local and community-based process — and that young people be recognized as peacebuilders, not only beneficiaries.

We call for:

- » Youth-led peacebuilding initiatives
- » Intercultural dialogue and safe spaces for young people from different communities
- » Prevention of hate speech and discrimination

4. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES THAT HELP YOUNG PEOPLE STAY, GROW AND BELONG

We demand real opportunities for young people to build their future in their communities. Peace and inclusive governance cannot be separated from education, employment, skills, entrepreneurship and economic dignity.

We call for:

- » Better career guidance and mentorship
- » Skills development and support for youth entrepreneurship
- » Stronger links between education and local economies
- » Expanded opportunities for young people in smaller municipalities

* published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia (Issue No. 10 on January 23, 2020)

5. PROTECT YOUNG VOICES, ACTIVISTS AND PEACEBUILDERS

We demand safe, respectful and enabling conditions for young people to speak, organize, advocate and participate.

We call for:

- » Protection from discrimination, intimidation and exclusion
- » Protection from hate speech and online harassment
- » Safe conditions for all young people who stand up for democracy, human rights, equality, environmental justice, inclusion and peace

6. YOUTH WELL-BEING AS A FOUNDATION FOR PARTICIPATION AND PEACE

We demand that youth well-being, mental health and healthy lifestyles be recognized as essential to inclusive governance and peacebuilding. Young people cannot fully participate, lead or build peace if they feel unsupported, overwhelmed or unsafe.

We call for:

- » Accessible, youth-friendly mental health support
- » Stigma-free spaces for seeking help
- » Sports, recreation and healthy lifestyle opportunities
- » Stronger cooperation between schools, municipalities, youth organizations, health professionals and sports clubs
- » Accessible and youth-friendly reproductive health services and education, free from stigma and discrimination

7. GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE THE TOOLS TO PARTICIPATE AND RESIST DIVISION

We demand stronger civic education, media literacy and resilience-building. Young people need tools to understand institutions, recognize misinformation, engage in public life and resist polarization.

We call for:

- » Civic education and education on youth rights and local governance
- » Media literacy programmes
- » Accessible information about youth councils and participation opportunities

8. SUSTAINABLE PEACE NEEDS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

We demand meaningful youth inclusion in local environmental decision-making. Air, water, food, public spaces, pollution, sustainability and climate action directly affect young people's health, safety and future.

We call for:

- » Youth-led green actions and environmental initiatives
- » Transparent environmental information
- » Environmental education in schools and communities
- » Stronger accountability for decisions affecting young people's quality of life

9. YOUTH SPACES, CREATIVITY AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

We demand accessible, safe and public spaces where young people can create, organize, express themselves and act. Art, culture and creativity are forms of participation, dialogue, identity and social change.

We call for:

- » Support for youth-led cultural and creative initiatives
- » Recognition and support for informal youth groups and grassroots actions
- » Youth spaces that enable volunteering, informal learning, civic action and community-building

10. LEAVE NO YOUNG PERSON OUTSIDE THE CONVERSATION

We demand participation processes that actively include those most often left out. Inclusive governance cannot exist if participation is accessible only to those who already have information, resources or institutional access.

We call for:

- » Targeted outreach to marginalized and underrepresented youth
- » Active inclusion of young people from rural areas and smaller municipalities
- » Multilingual and youth-friendly communication
- » Removal of physical, financial, social, geographic and digital barriers to participation

INSTITUTIONAL CALL AND FINAL APPEAL

We call on national institutions, municipalities, decision-makers, schools, youth councils, civil society organizations, international partners, health institutions and all relevant stakeholders to turn this Declaration into concrete action, including:

- » Local and national measures for Youth, Peace and Security
- » Stronger protection of young activists and peacebuilders
- » Civic education and media literacy programmes
- » Dedicated support for youth-led initiatives
- » Functional and accountable youth participation mechanisms
- » Accessible youth spaces
- » Active inclusion of marginalized and underrepresented youth

We demand that institutions move from statements of support to concrete action, resources and accountability, and call for regular follow-up on commitments made through this Declaration — with transparent communication on what has been done, what remains pending, and how youth recommendations will be taken forward.