Imagining Europe from the Western Balkans:
Youth Perspectives from North Macedonia

Young people in North Macedonia express a confident and layered understanding of Europe. Europe is primarily associated with prosperity, institutional functionality, cohesion, and multiculturalism, and is perceived less as an abstract political project than as a space defined by stability, diversity, and opportunity. Participants articulated a strong sense of cultural and value-based belonging to Europe, and clearly linked Europe to their personal and collective futures. At the same time, discussions revealed frustration with stalled progress toward EU integration and with domestic structural obstacles that limit reform. While Europe remains a central reference point, young people emphasized that meaningful inclusion depends on credible change at home, resulting in a tone that combines strong European identification with pragmatic awareness of existing constraints.

> “ We have come to the conclusion that Euroscepticism refers only to certain cultural values, not to European belonging.

How Young People Understand Europe

What Europe Means for Young People in This Context

Participants frequently referred to Europe as *“the most developed continent in the world”* and even as the *“cradle of the world’s civilization,”* emphasizing admiration for Europe’s long institutional memory, cultural heritage, and advanced governance standards. Europe was perceived as a *complex but functional system* where rules are followed; institutions operate predictably, and mobility across borders is both expected and protected.

Europe’s relevance to their everyday lives was never questioned. Participants articulated multiple layers through which Europe influences them directly: through political and economic dependency, through security frameworks like NATO, through mobility opportunities for education and work, and through information flows shaped by European media and standards. Europe is not “over there” — it is *embedded in their daily imaginaries and ambitions*.

Participants frequently articulated the belief that *Macedonians already share core European values*. As one participant noted, “we are an integral part of those.” At the same time, this sense of belonging coexisted with perceptions of external skepticism and rejection. Participants described feeling *culturally aligned* with Europe, yet *politically unfinished*, situated between aspiration and exclusion. This coexistence of identification and perceived distance shaped much of how young people understood their relationship with Europe.

Europe and the Western Balkans

Europe was often discussed through comparison with the Western Balkans, with participants highlighting persistent *gaps in governance quality, rule of law, and institutional effectiveness*. The region was not described as culturally or civilisationally distant from Eu-

rope, but as constrained by domestic political failures that prevent the full realization of European standards. In this framing, the Western Balkans are understood as part of Europe in values, yet institutionally unfinished.

Participants emphasized that *European support should be linked to accountability* rather than provided unconditionally. Financial assistance alone was widely seen as insufficient without expert supervision and strict conditionality.

> “ The problem is that we (our institutions) believe that no matter what we do, no matter how corrupt we are. Europe will continue to give us money.

This perception fed frustration with both domestic governance and the stalled EU integration process, as prolonged delays and inconsistent enlargement criteria were seen to undermine trust and credibility.

Concrete comparisons between North Macedonia and Europe further sharpened this tension. Participants pointed to *domestic strengths* such as natural resources, tourism potential, relatively low taxes, accessible, though imperfect, healthcare, and a warm social culture. Yet these positives were consistently overshadowed by *concerns* about corruption, nepotism, infrastructural decay, and environmental neglect. As several participants emphasized, the overall contrast with Europe remains “very different.” This comparison also produced moments of self-critique, captured in the remark:

> “ We cannot think about problems at the European level when our roads are still unpaved.

These reflections point to a broader dilemma: young people feel European through values but constrained by domestic conditions that limit full political and institutional alignment.

Europe in the World

When discussing broader challenges such as climate change, conflict, inequality, corruption, and democratic deficits, *participants consistently linked global dynamics to domestic realities*. Climate change was understood as both a global problem and a failure of local governance, reflecting insufficient institutional and civic responsibility. Corruption and institutional weakness were framed as obstacles not only to EU integration but also to effective engagement with global challenges, leading participants to stress the need for European conditionality, oversight, and targeted support for institutional strengthening.

Europe was widely perceived as an *important global actor*, particularly in economic and regulatory terms, with expectations that it promotes democratic standards and international cooperation. At the same time, participants expressed *concern about Europe’s capacity to act decisively* amid global crises, noting that internal divisions weaken its influence. In the regional context, Europe was expected to play a stabilizing role in supporting reforms, security, and democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans, with its credibility seen as dependent on aligning declared values with political practice.

The Role of Youth and Political Agency

How Young People See Their Own Role and Limitations

Participants emphasized that a sense of European belonging is strengthened when citizens, especially young people, are meaningfully included in decision-making processes. Youth participation was thus framed not only as a democratic principle, but as a *condition for genuine identification with Europe*.

> “ The bigger the inclusion of the citizens, the stronger the affiliation.

Participants proposed a *range of participatory mechanisms* to strengthen youth involvement in policy-making and integration debates. They highlighted the need for functional municipal youth councils, pointing out that many municipalities lack such structures altogether.

Youth political organizations were also identified as important spaces for engagement, with participants stressing the need for stable financial support to ensure their independence and effectiveness.

Additional proposals included opening parliamentary committee debates to youth observers, creating a centralized platform with youth-related draft laws open for public input, and establishing clearer and more transparent communication channels between institutions and young citizens. Local examples, such as youth organizations in Ohrid, were cited to illustrate both the potential of youth engagement and its vulnerability when political influence undermines autonomy.

Key Topics for Young People

Across all discussion phases, five interconnected themes emerged as essential for improving North Macedonia's European trajectory:

- Education and Awareness
- Technological Development
- Institutional Reform
- Monitoring and Accountability for EU Funds
- Media Responsibility

These clusters reveal a generation that is *both aspirational and pragmatic* — hopeful about Europe, but firm that internal reforms must precede meaningful integration. Education and awareness were emphasized as prerequisites for informed engagement with EU structures and values, alongside improved media literacy to counter misinformation and support accurate public understanding. Technological development and modernization were seen as necessary for alignment with European standards, while institutional reform, particularly strengthening the rule of law, reducing corruption, and improving administrative efficiency, was viewed as a must have. Participants also stressed the need for stronger monitoring and accountability in the use of EU funds, arguing that European support should be clearly linked to measurable reforms.

Emotional Landscape and Differences

The emotional tone of the workshop was complex. Participants expressed *pride* in shared European values and *confidence* in their cultural belonging to Europe, but also *deep frustration* with domestic governance failures. A recurrent theme was *apathy* born from structural stagnation, as expressed in the quote "we lack motivation" and the observation that "apathy mostly arises from ignorance." These remarks point to a sense of *exhaustion* with unfulfilled promises of reform and limited access to reliable information about the EU.

Participants also highlighted the *role of media in shaping Euroscepticism*, noting that journalists often provide superficial or biased reporting on European affairs. This, they argued, contributes to misconceptions, political manipulation, and generational divides — with older citizens perceived as more conservative and more influenced by misleading narratives about the EU.

Although the workshop was largely cohesive, participants identified certain issues that remain divisive in Macedonian society. *LGBTQ+ rights* were mentioned as an area of significant disagreement, reflecting broader ideological divides in the country. This issue did not dominate the conversation but appeared as a marker of generational and political differences.

Concluding Insights

Young people in North Macedonia see themselves as fundamentally European, both in values and identity, and strongly oriented toward reform. Their vision of Europe is not romanticized, but grounded in expectations of fairness, functionality, accountability, and shared responsibility. Frustration expressed during the discussions was directed less at Europe itself and more at domestic systems perceived as obstructing progress.

The prevailing imaginary that emerges is one of *conditional belonging*: Europe is under-

stood as the rightful political and normative horizon, yet young people believe that North Macedonia must first address internal structural weaknesses to fully claim its place within the European political community. This perspective reflects a generation that combines confidence in European values with a clear-eyed assessment of the reforms required to make that belonging tangible.

Methodological note

The deliberative workshop in Skopje brought together young people aged 18–25 from a range of backgrounds. Discussions were guided by a trained team consisting of one moderator and two facilitators, and participants were provided with relevant background materials in advance. While the workshop offered rich qualitative insights, the group was not intended to be representative of the broader N. Macedonian youth population.

The youth deliberative workshop held in North Macedonia gathered a highly engaged and well-informed group of participants who were eager to reflect on Europe's meaning for the Western Balkans and to explore their own role in shaping Europe's future. Participants demonstrated *exceptionally high interest and solid prior knowledge* about Europe, drawing on personal experiences, education, news, and mobility-related stories. Participants frequently differentiated between youth perspectives and the older, more conservative generation, noting a generational divide.

About the project

Youth Agency and New Political Imaginaries in the Western Balkans is a regional research and policy-oriented project that brings young people's perspectives into discussions on Europe and democratic change in the region. The project explores how young people understand Europe, political agency, and the future of the Western Balkans within Europe. It is structured around three interconnected pillars – RECAS postdoc fellowship, Academic Policy Lab and deliberative workshops that gathered 92 students in total. Through deliberative workshops conducted in seven Western Balkan capitals, youth views are articulated and synthesized into country snapshots that inform fellows' research and subsequent policy-oriented work. By connecting youth perspectives with collective analysis and targeted policy work, the project aims to support democratic innovation and regional cooperation while staying close to young people's lived experiences.

About RECAS network

The Regional Network of Centers for Advanced Studies (RECAS) is a collaborative academic network bringing together research centers across Southeast Europe. It aims to strengthen regional cooperation, support early-career researchers, and promote high-quality, interdisciplinary research on key societal challenges. Through fellowships, joint research activities, and policy-oriented initiatives, RECAS fosters knowledge exchange within the region and between Southeast Europe and wider European and global academic and policy communities.

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