



# Youth Engagement in Decision-Making: European Approaches to Inclusive Participation and Albanian Perspective

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## Abstract

Integration in the European Union remains one of the key objectives of the Western Balkans countries. The institutions of the European Union are giving greater importance to the opportunities for greater involvement of young people in democratic life, influencing the strengthening of the sense of citizenship for the countries that are part of the European Union and, on the other hand, to develop a European perspective for countries that aspire to become part of the union. In this paper we explore the perceptions of young people in Albania, aged 18-31, regarding their engagement in democratic life and more specifically their involvement in political decision-making processes. To explore this issues we use a mixed research methods, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. For this purpose, is conducted an evaluation of documents and political initiatives, in the level of European Union and also Albanian state. It was also conducted a survey in a national context, with the participation of 186 youth people, mainly young activists, to explore their perception regarding these issues. According to the main findings, the level of engagement of young people in these processes is low, regardless of their desire and willingness to engage.

**Keywords:** Albania; decision-making; inclusion; perceptions; negotiation process

## **1. Introduction**

Youth participation in democratic life as well as their inclusion in social life is increasingly considered a matter of priority importance at the level of the European Union. In this way, it is believed that fostering and supporting young people's engagement and active participation is directly tied to establishing channels of communication and constructive dialogue. The new European Union Youth Dialogue, proposed by the European Commission in the Communication on the next European Union Youth Strategy 2019 to 2027, should be built on the achievements of the Structured Dialogue with young people. Undoubtedly, the Structured Dialogue has not achieved its full potential even at the European level, and further improvements in the new European Union Youth Dialogue are vital to the impact and quality outcomes of the process. That's why this discussion comes at the right time, allowing reflection and advancing this youth participation mechanism for the next generation. However, for the new European Union Youth Dialogue to be a success, youth involvement in the negotiation scheme or plan needs to be introduced and implemented properly in Albania, which requires the creation of effective working structures on a national level - national working groups. These structures are crucial because they unite a wide range of youth sector actors, including governments, youth organizations, youth work organizations, National Agencies for Erasmus+ (hereinafter "National Agencies"), and others who have the resources and networks to connect with and work with various groups of young people locally. The solution to how to connect with young people who are marginalized or on the fringes of engagement can be discovered locally, by including as many local actors as possible who work regularly with various young people, including youth workers, youth organizations, schools, youth programs, and so forth. To promote EU values and spirit in the center of society and from the core of society, the principle is to bring these actors together, have enough resources to support them in their work and reach out to young people systematically and proactively. In this paper, we explore the dimensions of the policies undertaken at the level of the European Union and the adoption of similar policies by the Albanian state, intending to increase the level of engagement of young people in society and their involvement in decision-making. Through the realization of a questionnaire with young Albanians, we explore their perceptions of the European Integration Process of Albania and their involvement in this process.

### **1.1. European approach to inclusive youth policies in decision-making processes**

The participation of young people in the integration process is considered a priority policy by the EU institutions to build a European perspective for countries aspiring to join the European Union and to build European citizenship for the countries that are already part of the union. Providing chances for young people to participate in policymaking, service and program development, design, and shaping is considered essential to effective youth engagement (Mampane, 2019).

The European Commission and the Council of Europe cooperate to create synergies between their youth-oriented initiatives (Lavchyan & Williamson, 2019). In the preamble of the "Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life," it is emphasized that:

"..... The active participation of young people in decisions and actions at the local and regional levels is essential if we want to build a more democratic, inclusive, and prosperous society. Active participation and citizenship have to do with the right, the

means, the space, and the opportunity and when necessary to be supported to participate, to influence the decisions, and to be involved in actions and activities to contribute to building a better society” (Council of Europe, 2015).

In every democratic society, participation is considered an essential part of citizenship, specifically, youth participation in democratic/public life is considered a fundamental human right, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The perspective that a government or decision-makers perceive young people is reflected in their youth policies. A youth policy's value framework is important to take into consideration since it affects everything from the very beginning of the process of creating it to the policies or programs that target young people and the objectives they want to achieve (Lavchyan & Williamson, 2019). In the European context, Youth policies mix a variety of concerns to guarantee the well-being of youth offering relevant learning opportunities, raising the likelihood of their successful integration into society and the transition to autonomy, and participation in decision-making and civil society (Council of Europe, 2008). It is crucial to note that the 2001 White Paper on Youth Policy served as the foundation for the first unified model policy document related to European youth (European Commission, 2001). When it comes to youth participation, the concepts that come up most frequently in the political documents of the European Union are: “Co-management”, “Structure dialogue” and most recently “Youth dialogue”. In essence, all three of these commonly used concepts seek to emphasize how essential it is to engage youth and give youth a voice in decisions that have an impact on their lives.

In this context, it is important to note that, the Council of Europe decided to create a special decision-making framework by bringing together government and non-governmental partner representatives through the co-management system. This sector's unique system of co-management, where government representatives and young people have equal votes, is evidence of meaningful experience in youth engagement. It is usually referred to as; “a unique and valuable mechanism for cooperation between governments and youth organizations” (Council of Europe, 2008). In the meantime, according to Williams & Heinen & Meyers (2012) (Finnish Youth Research Network, 2014), the concept of co-management is defined as: “a system used in the Council of Europe's Youth Sector, where young people and government representatives sit around the same table to make decisions based on the youth reality.” Meanwhile, the European Commission selected the concept of Structured Dialogue in 2005, as an approach to cooperation between decision-making structures and youth and youth organizations. The concept of Structured Dialogue, was further supported by the Resolution of October 26, 2006 (2), in which it is emphasized that: “the structured dialogue and its outcome should be taken into account in the formulation of policies at the relevant levels”. The Structure Dialogue was put into practice with the 2009 Framework of Cooperation (European Commission, 2009). Governments and administrations, including EU institutions, discuss chosen themes with young people, to obtain results that are useful for policymaking. Youth organizations play a particularly important role in the structured dialogue, as they speak on behalf of a great number of young people. However, this approach also aims at reaching youth who are not formally organized and who have fewer chances (Denstand, 2009). According to author Banjac (2016), this process has become remarkably well-known and is perceived as a useful tool in finding solutions for the risks facing young people across the EU.

The consultation process was included in further policy instruments in November 2018, when the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 was adopted by the Youth Ministers in the

Council of the European Union. The three main areas of focus of the European Union Youth Strategy are the terms: Engage, Connect, Empower, and the Youth Goals. The strategy aims to include as many as possible young people and make EU programs more inclusive for those who have fewer opportunities. The Strategy takes into account the results of dialogue with young people which led to the identification of 11 European Youth Goals (Lavchyan & Williamson, 2019). The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030, are both designed to tackle the needs and issues young people currently face. When it comes to the implementation though, it is important to acknowledge the existing differences between countries across Europe, in terms of their governance, ways of living, the organization of the societies, and even related to the importance of youth, their role, and contribution (Tuțuianu, 2022).

In the meantime, important parts of this document are the European Union Youth Dialogue and the European Union Youth Goals. The main components of the European Youth Dialogue include direct communication between decision-makers and youth and their representatives, youth consultation on issues that affect them, and ongoing collaboration in the governance of the process at the local, national, and European levels (European Union, 2019). At the European level, the Youth Dialogue is a great example of the European mechanism, addressing all young people and using consultations and activities with young people, organizations, and policymakers, within national working groups (Tuțuianu, 2022).

Notwithstanding these regulations, according to author Denstad (2009), the importance of youth participation in decision-making processes and the special role of youth organizations in representing the interests of young is closely related to the idea that young people themselves are the best experts on youth policies and including young people encourages a wider feeling of decision-making ownership. Denstad (2009) argues that the incorporation of young people in all aspects of policy decision-making about issues that impact them becomes particularly reasonable when we consider them not as future citizens but as important assets to their local communities and as proactive change agents who can provide their energy, idealism, and insights to improve society. It is important to emphasize that young people cannot be considered to be simply another “interest group”, and this argument be used to keep them out of the decision-making process.

The participation of youth in local and regional life depends on the commitment of local authorities to provide appropriate instruments that facilitate their ability to initiate action. Young people are even more interested in the public life of their community when they feel that they have an opportunity to improve the area in which they live. The youth has a lot of potential that is not realized. When provided with suitable resources, youth can broaden their perspectives and encourage public discourse regarding the operation of their city as well as its region (Kuligowski, 2016).

## **1.2. Dimensions of policies for the involvement of young people in Albanian context**

Integration of Albania in the European Union remains one of the main priorities of the Albanian governments over the years. In addition to many actors involved, youth and youth organizations which are the focus of an important part of European Union policies, have an especially heavy load and importance in the successful completion of this process in all countries seeking EU membership.

Albania, according to all indicators, is one of the few countries in the European continent in which the young population, constitutes 22.7% of the total population, according to the data of the Institute of Statistics for 2021 (Monitor, 2023).

Despite this indicator, it is worth noting that the involvement of young people in decision-making processes at both central and local levels remains low. In this regard, keeping young people away from decision-making processes reflects nothing, but a fragile level of democracy. The adoption of significant documents like the National Youth Strategy 2003, which was improved by adapting to the new socio-political conditions of the country also the National Youth Strategy 2007-2013, are two concrete legal policies that governments in Albania have implemented over the years to improve the situation of youth involvement. The results indicate that young participation in decision-making increased slightly from 10% in 2007 to 25% in 2012, which seems to be a result of youth policies. Despite these statistics until 2013, young people had little influence over national policy and were "never a priority of politics and decision-making," (National Action Plan for Youth, 2015-2020).

Under these conditions, the new government, which emerged from the 2013 elections, gave young people's policies particular consideration. The idea to develop the National Action Plan for Youth is presented as a necessity in the conditions when the National Youth Strategy (2007-2013) was no longer in force, but also to have it in coherence with the economic and socio-cultural orientations and objectives of the new government.

As a result, in May 2015 the Albanian government approved the National Action Plan for Youth (2015 - 2020) which had as its first strategy the promotion of youth and their participation in democratic processes and political decision-making.

Additionally, Prime Minister Rama has emphasized in his speech the significance of including young people underlining that: "for a society, it is meaningless to try to solve the problems faced by the youth without the youth participation and without seriously investing in the youth." (National Action Plan for Youth, 2015-2020). It is important to emphasize that in June 2014, was launched the National Youth Service. The Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth placed this in charge of implementing youth policy.

Undoubtedly, the formation of the Regional Office for Youth Cooperation (RYCO) in 2016 has been one of the Western Balkans' most encouraging success stories in the framework of the Berlin Process. Through funded programs offered by the Erasmus Plus project of the European Union and other institutions or donors, such as the Council of Europe Youth Department, SALTO, FES, and USAID, young people have the chance to travel, improve their skills (The Balkan Forum, 2020). The adoption of the National Strategy for Development and Integration 2014–2020, expresses the vision of how EU membership of Albania will be approached through the policies and actions of the government (Council of Ministers, 2014). Despite the Albanian government's coherence in adopting programs and strategies, that are consistent with the European Union's priorities, the position of young people does not turn out to be significantly positive change.

By the end of 2017, neither the government nor the municipalities had established any structures or investment funds for the implementation of the National Action Plan for Youth,

according to the report *Youth Political Participation in Albania* (2018). This indicates that there aren't enough policies in place to encourage young people's effective engagement in decision- and policy-making. In this period, as a country aiming for membership in the European Union, there is still no legal definition for young people until 2019, when the Law on Youth was adopted following a broad consultation process. The Law on Youth (2019), emphasizes especially the empowerment of young people by creating the conditions and opportunities for their participation in decision-making processes, through the creation of mechanisms responsible for the protection and promotion of their rights at the central or local level. In this period, according to data from the 2019 Balkan Barometer, Albania has the region's most passive political population with 57% of them not engaging in any discussion of government decision-making (Regional Cooperation Council, 2019). In this regard, it's important to underline that, despite legislative initiatives, there continues to be an inconsistency between the real situation of youth inclusion and the legal framework. According to authors Peci and Nikolli (2017), youth engagement continues to rely on "ad hoc" approaches and the goodwill of both domestic and international actors. They underline the significance of involving young people in dialogue and consultation processes at an all-inclusive level. In this context and with the aim of improving the situation of young people, recently following a process of consultation and dialogue with young people was approved the National Youth Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2029 which is in line with the major European documents for youth, such as the Youth Strategy of the Council of Europe and the European Youth Strategy, to address the many challenges that today's youth face, including their participation in decision-making processes.

## **2. Methods**

This paper presents a mixed methods research project that aims to explore young people's perceptions of their activism and political engagement in Albania's European integration process. The realization of this paper has gone through several stages:

First, the paper is focused on a literature review basically on policy documents, articles, and report analysis, to provide a clear overview of the legal framework and initiatives undertaken at the European Union level to promote the engagement and inclusion of young people in various decision-making processes, as well as the adaptation of this framework by countries aspiring to join the EU, such as Albania. The literature review phase helped with the construction of a database of previous reports and studies on the subject, which assisted in the development of research instruments.

Second, the paper focused on collecting primary data through a questionnaire with 23 questions aiming to explore the level of engagement in the process of policy-making for issues related to youth. The developed questionnaire was designed in three sessions. The first session focuses on collecting demographic data, the second session is designed to get information about the participation and activism of young people in decision-making and the third session includes questions that explore the youth perception of European Integration and the country's progress in the EU Membership Process and their involvement in this process.

The quantitative component

A questionnaire was created for collecting primary quantitative data, which was distributed through the Google platform. The main objective was to explore young people's perceptions of their level of commitment and engagement in decision-making processes in general, along with

the level of information they have and their involvement in the European integration process of Albania in the EU. The youth aged 18-31 years old were chosen as the study's target population. Young student activists and CSOs were approached to identify all relevant participants and their contact details. A total of approximately 300 individuals were identified and contacted to provide information about the survey. Only 186 individuals completed it after two rounds of distribution in September 2020. The survey was evaluated and tested on a small number of young people, before final distribution. The main characteristics of the sample are: Gender: n = 186; 71% female, residence: 86.6% living in an urban area; 45.2% in the capital city Tirana, Age: 52.7% 18-22 years old, Status: 50 % students.

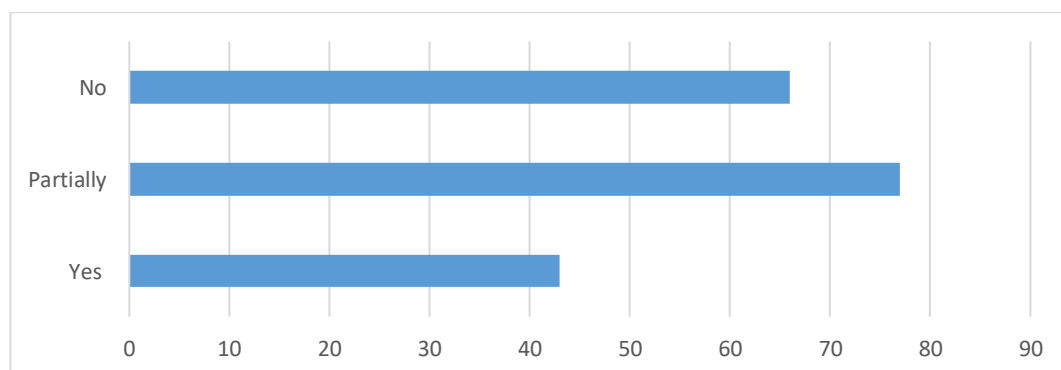
Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the quantitative data collected, to describe or summarize them, and to reflect the parameters of the study.

#### Ethical considerations and limitations

A group of social scientists and researchers collaborated and carried out the research. In the beginning, data collection tools were piloted. The tools were further modified and made to be the greatest fit for the targeted group using feedback from the piloting. Before receiving consent for participation, all participants were first approached (over the phone, via email, or in person,) and given more information about the study topic. The majority of the young people who participated in this study and answered the questionnaire are those who are more active, and engaged in society. For this limitation, these results cannot be generalized. In this restriction, including other young people who are less involved in society would be beneficial.

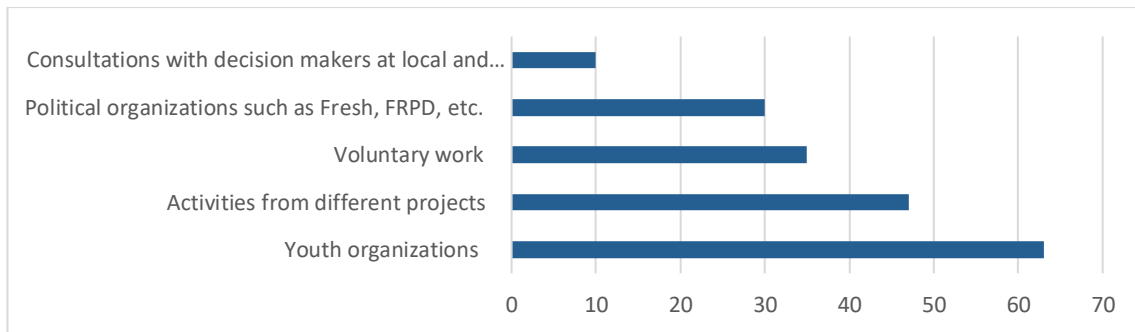
### 2.1. Results

The involvement of young people in decision-making, according to the survey, when they are asked if have ever been part of decision-making processes in general, suggests that only 23.1% of the respondents have been involved in decision-making processes, while 41.4% of them were only partially involved, while 35.5% of the respondents have never been involved in any decision-making process.



Graph 1. The level of involment in decision-making processes in the community/city

According to the data, young people have the highest level of involvement in youth organizations with 33.9% of respondents reporting engagement. Activities from different projects come in second with 25.3%, followed by voluntary work at 18.8%. Engagement in political organizations such as Fresh, FRPD, etc. rank fourth with 16.1%, while consultations with decision-makers at local and central level have the lowest participation rate at 5.9%.

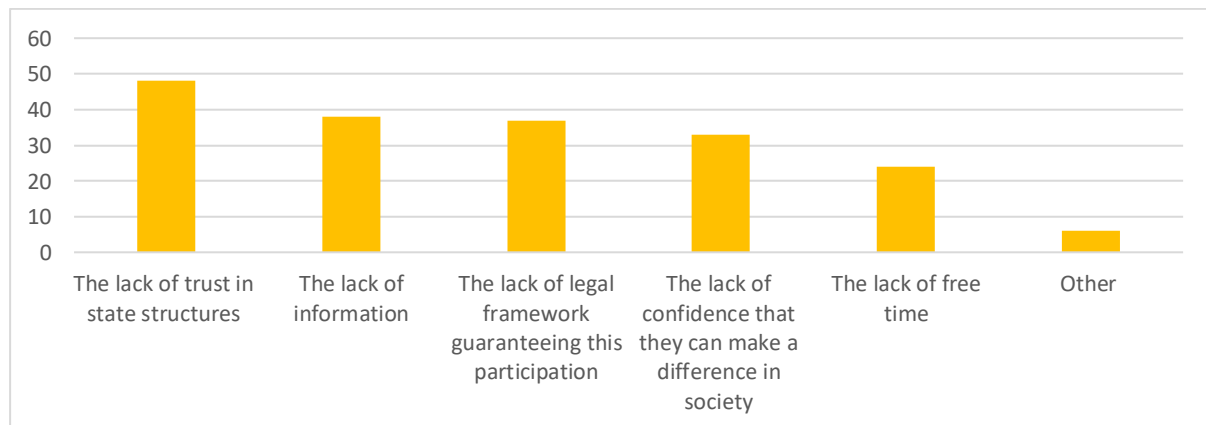


Graph 2. The types of organizations/activities in which young people are mostly involved in

The main reasons that motivate young people to participate in the above forms of organizations are a) desire to bring a new spirit of change with 48.4%, b) acquisition of knowledge and skills with 18.8%, c) personal fulfillment with 11.8%, and e) socialization with 8.6%.

The high interest of young people to be engaged in youth organizations or other activities related to projects reflects some positive aspects of youth involvement in the community, suggesting that the spaces these organizations create for them as well as the level of trust that young people have in them impact their proactive engagement in addressing the issues that are important to young people.

According to the responses received, the study found that the main barriers that often prevent greater political participation are: a) the lack of trust in state structures, 25.8%; b) the lack of information, 20.4%; c) and the lack of legal framework guaranteeing this participation, 19.9%; d) the lack of confidence that they can make a difference in society, 17.7%; e) the lack of free time, 12.9%; f) 3.3% other.



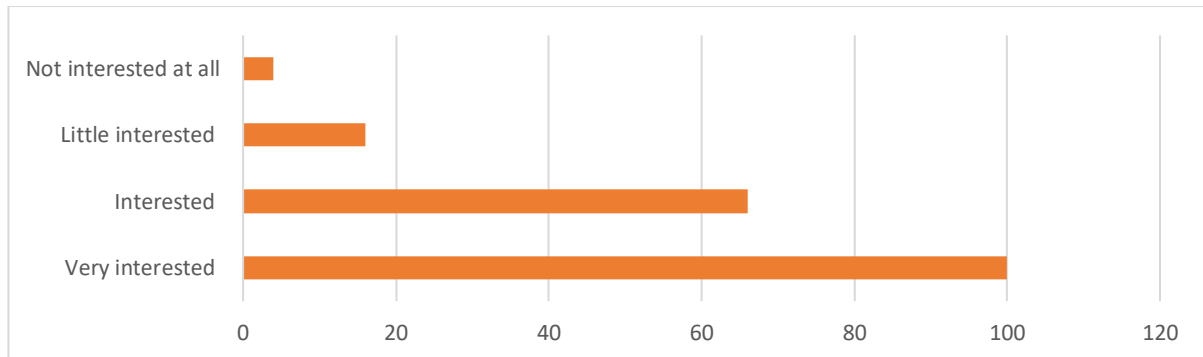
Graph 3: Perceptions of the main barriers affecting young people engagement

Regarding the level of knowledge about the European Union, 41.4% of the participants in the survey have an average level of information about the European Union institutions and the policies pursued by each of these institutions. The topic of the European Union's youth policies seems to be, the most significant topic of interest among respondents with a high percentage of 71.5%.

According to the survey, it appears that the majority of respondents 52.7% stated that had very little information about the Negotiation opening process in Albania, while 9.1% of them had no information at all about this process. Only 38.2% of respondents claim to be very informed

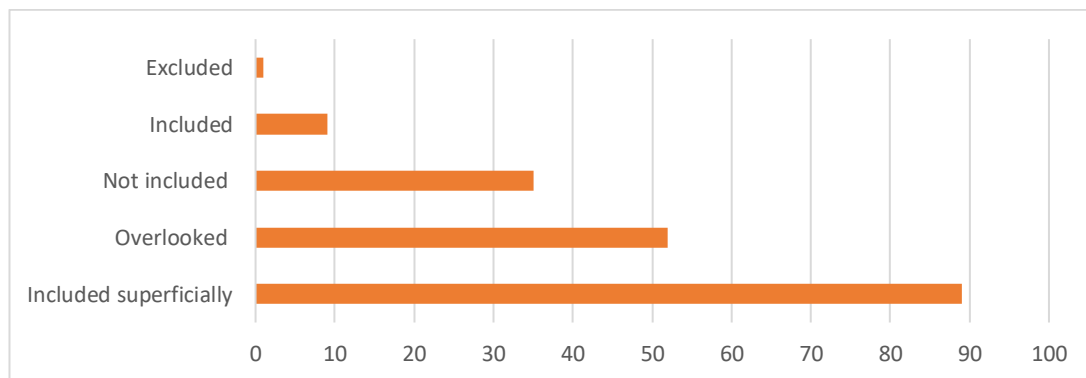


about the Negotiation opening process. In the meantime, the important thing to mention is that when asked, if are interested in getting more knowledge about these processes, the majority of the participants in the survey were very interested (54.3%) while only 1.6% had no interest at all to get more knowledge about these processes.



Graph 4. The level of interest to get more knowledge for Negotiation Opening Process

The urge to understand more regarding this process reflects the desire to have more influence over decisions impacting their lives. When asked, how they perceive the role of youth in the European Integration process of Albania, the majority of participants in the survey (47.8%) think that young people have been included superficially, 28% think that youth have been overlooked in decision-making, 18.8% think that they have not been included in decision-making at all, 5% think they are included in decision-making, while only 0.4% think they are excluded from this process.



Graph 5. Perceptions on youth involvement in the process of the European Integration Process in Albania

In such a context, the vast majority (91.4%) of the participants in the study believe that decision-making in the field of European integration must become more inclusive. It is considered of great importance to involve more young people in decision-making (for youth-related issues), additionally, frequent consultations with CSO, media, academics, or other interest groups are also necessary.

The current state of youth engagement in these critical processes raises concerns about the effectiveness, their low level of information, and low level of engagement in these processes, but it is important to emphasize the positive thing that, youth are optimistic, cooperative, and willing to collaborate to get more active involvement.

## **2.2. Discussions**

The involvement of youth in decision-making processes remains one of the main challenges in the case of Albania and in general in the countries of the Western Balkans, which have integration into the European Union as the main objective in their foreign policy. Regardless of the efforts made and the adoption of legislation in line with that of the European Union, unfortunately youth in Albania have not been involved enough in the enlargement process and general in decision-making processes. Taking this into account, and based on the results of this study, as on the observation of the mechanisms that were established by respective institutions concerning youth involvement in the European integration process of Albania, it is necessary for a meaningful engagement of the youth, to encourage their participation by enhancing its sectoral expertise and role, being extensively engaged in the discussion roundtables, to raise their voice for involvement in all processes provided by law. Countries like Albania should be considered a political priority, the investment in youth-focused capacity-building initiatives, providing young people with the knowledge and abilities necessary to contribute productively to discussions and democratic life, increased cooperation among all youth organizations at any level, and most importantly, it is necessary to institutionalize the involvement of young people.

## **3. Conclusion**

In democratic systems, governments need to promote and support participation in decision-making, starting with making the process accessible, open, and transparent. Despite the many initiatives undertaken, with the aim of inclusion of as many young people as possible in discussions and decision-making, this process is still far from achieving these objectives.

Furthermore, regardless of their interest and desire to participate in the political processes, and to bring a new spirit of change, the data show that young people have a low level of engagement in these processes. It is important to emphasize that the gap between the decision-makers and the young people is because of barriers such as the lack of trust in state structures, the lack of information, and the lack of legal framework that guarantees their participation. An overwhelming majority of young people participating in the study have very low levels of knowledge about the process of integration of Albania into the European Union, and at the same time, it turns out that they have average knowledge about the institutions of the European Union and the relevant policies in operation of the inclusion of young people.

Meanwhile, there is a high level of trust that the young people seem to have in youth organizations, suggesting that the spaces these organizations create for them, impact their proactive engagement in addressing the issues that are important to most of the young people. In this sense, it is important to underline that, in practice, must be created wider spaces to allow young people's views and their representative structures to be included in all phases of decision-making processes that have an impact on their lives.

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