Youth in Central and Eastern Europe

Vol. 13 No. 21 / 2026
ISSN 2720-4049

Received: 16.07.2026 Revised: 04.09.2026 Accepted: 06.11.2026 Available: 20.11.2026

Marija Topuzovska Latkovikj

Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6069-5690
marija_t@isppi.ukim.edu.mk

Mirjana Borota Popovska

Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7272-7554
mborota@isppi.ukim.edu.mk

Nita Starova Spiroska

Faculty of Philosophy, University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0071-4734
nita_starova@yahoo.com

CHANGING REALITIES OF MACEDONIAN YOUTH: POLYCRISIS, PARTICIPATION AND ASPIRATIONS

ZMIENIAJĄCA SIĘ RZECZYWISTOŚĆ MŁODZIEŻY MACEDOŃSKIEJ: POLIKRYZYS, UCZESTNICTWO I ASPIRACJE

DOI: 10.24917/ycee.12960

Abstract: This article examines changing youth realities in North Macedonia through an integrative synthesis of the 2018/2019 and 2024 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung youth studies and complementary research on the pandemic, young people not in employment, education or training (NEET), participation and elections. It addresses three research questions concerning the reflection of overlapping crises in youth experiences, transitions to adulthood and expectations of merit, and the relationship between participation, institutional trust and migration aspirations. Direct temporal comparisons are restricted to comparable survey indicators; complementary sources retain their methodological boundaries. The findings reveal uneven change: improvements in labour-market indicators coexist with educational dissatisfaction, limited political representation and strong migration aspirations. Support for European Union membership declined, while trust in the Union remained stable. Comparable fears remained elevated but did not intensify. Read through life course and polycrisis perspectives, these patterns suggest a gap between formal opportunities and confidence in fair, attainable futures. The article connects transitions, participation and aspirations without treating polycrisis as a causal variable or the studies as a single longitudinal dataset. Its contribution is to show why employment, institutional inclusion and subjective prospects need to be examined together. Policy implications concern educational relevance, fair recruitment, care-sensitive support and youth participation with demonstrable influence..

Keywords: youth studies; polycrisis; youth transitions; youth participation; NEET youth; institutional trust; migration aspirations; North Macedonia

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje przemiany sytuacji młodzieży w Macedonii Północnej w warunkach nakładających się kryzysów społecznych, ekonomicznych, zdrowotnych i politycznych. Celem badania jest określenie, w jaki sposób doświadczenie polikryzysu wiąże się z procesem wchodzenia w dorosłość, sytuacją edukacyjną i zawodową, uczestnictwem społecznym i politycznym, zaufaniem do instytucji, aspiracjami migracyjnymi oraz oceną własnej przyszłości. Podstawę analizy stanowi integracyjna synteza wyników badań młodzieży Fundacji im. Friedricha Eberta z lat 2018/2019 i 2024, uzupełniona wynikami badań dotyczących pandemii COVID-19, młodzieży NEET, partycypacji oraz reprezentacji młodych ludzi w wyborach. Wyniki wskazują, że poprawa części obiektywnych wskaźników sytuacji młodzieży na rynku pracy nie przekłada się jednoznacznie na wzrost poczucia bezpieczeństwa i możliwości realizacji aspiracji. Utrzymują się niezadowolenie z jakości edukacji, przekonanie o znaczeniu pozamerytorycznych kryteriów zatrudnienia, ograniczone zaufanie do instytucji politycznych oraz poczucie niewielkiego wpływu młodzieży na życie publiczne. Jednocześnie aspiracje migracyjne pozostają bardzo silne, a młodzi ludzie częściej wiążą możliwość poprawy własnej sytuacji z indywidualną mobilnością niż ze zmianą warunków społecznych w kraju. Analiza pokazuje, że doświadczenia macedońskiej młodzieży nie tworzą prostego obrazu pogłębiającego się kryzysu, lecz wskazują na współwystępowanie poprawy w niektórych obszarach z trwałością barier strukturalnych i poczucia niepewności. Z perspektywy biegu życia polikryzys stanowi kontekst, w którym młodzi ludzie konstruują swoje strategie wchodzenia w dorosłość, uczestnictwa i planowania przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: studia nad młodzieżą, polikryzys, wchodzenie w dorosłość, partycypacja młodzieży, młodzież NEET, zaufanie instytucjonalne, aspiracje migracyjne, Macedonia Północna

Introduction

The life course perspective provides the starting point for examining young people under conditions of polycrisis. It distinguishes between individual, generational and historical time. *Individual time* concerns biological age and culturally shared expectations about age-related roles, rights and transitions; *generational time* locates individuals within cohorts; and *historical time* captures the political, economic and technological events and changes through which cohorts live (Price et al., 2000; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985). Within this perspective, a transition is a change in status, role or key life event, whereas a trajectory is the longer pattern of stability and change within which several transitions occur (Elder, 1985). Completion of education, entry into stable employment, leaving the parental home, partnership or marriage, and parenthood are key passages in the transition to adulthood. They may be delayed, interrupted or reversed; young people may, for example, return to unemployment or remain dependent on parental support. These pathways are therefore shaped not only by individual choices, but also by cohort position, historical circumstances and access to social and economic resources.

From a generational perspective, youth is not only a biological age group, but also a formative location in historical time. Following Mannheim's generation theory and later life course and youth-transition literature, young people's aspirations, concerns and future orientations are understood as situated at the intersection of individual life course, cohort and period effects (Mannheim, 1952; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Woodman & Wyn, 2015).

Polycrisis provides a framework for examining this intersection. Lawrence et al. (2024) define global polycrisis as the causal entanglement of crises in multiple systems; its analytical value lies in showing how slow-moving stresses and more immediate disruptions may interact, amplify one another and generate consequences different from those of any crisis considered in isolation. When society is viewed as an interconnected whole, economic, political, health, environmental and geopolitical pressures cannot simply be treated as separate developments. In this article, polycrisis is used as an interpretative lens for examining temporally layered processes affecting

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

education-to-work transitions, family dependence, institutional trust, participation, migration and future orientations.

Since gaining independence in 1991, North Macedonia has undergone a prolonged post-socialist transition marked by economic restructuring and institutional transformation. Most young people covered by this study were born or socialised within these conditions, in which economic insecurity, uneven employment opportunities and political instability have remained recurrent features. The period further included the student protests of 2014/2015 and the Colourful Revolution in 2016, both of which unfolded during the political crisis preceding the 2016 parliamentary elections and the formation of a new government in 2017. Their formative years were also shaped by the country's protracted European integration path. The Prespa Agreement resolved the long-standing name dispute with Greece and opened the way to NATO membership in 2020, while Bulgaria's veto delayed the formal opening of the accession process, and subsequent conditions have continued to constrain its advancement (European Commission, 2025). The subsequent period was marked by the COVID-19 global health crisis, economic crisis, the war in Ukraine, inflation, and recent conflicts in the Middle East. Taken together, these long-term transformations and more recent disruptions form the historical context in which young people construct trust, belonging and future expectations.

The article does not seek to establish the causal mechanisms of a global polycrisis or to attribute particular youth outcomes to individual events. Rather, it examines how long-standing transition constraints may intersect with more recent disruptions in the lives of young people. This perspective makes it possible to consider education-to-work transitions, family dependence, institutional trust, participation, migration and future orientations as interconnected dimensions of young people's experience, while retaining the methodological boundaries of the available evidence.

At the national policy level, youth issues received greater institutional recognition through the National Youth Strategies 2016–2025 and 2023–2027, as well as the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020). These frameworks establish formal commitments to youth participation, youth work and local policy mechanisms (Agency for Youth and Sport, 2016, 2023; Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020). Their practical reach and effectiveness, however, are observed rather than assumed in this article.

Accordingly, the article addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How are cumulative and interrelated national, regional, European and global social, economic, health and political crises, including fears of war and regional insecurity, reflected in the experiences and attitudes of young people in North Macedonia?
- RQ2. How does polycrisis intersect with young people's transitions to adulthood, employment expectations, perceptions of merit and future orientations?
- RQ3. How are young people's political and social participation, trust in national institutions and the European Union, and migration intentions understood within the context of polycrisis?

Methodology and analytical approach

This article uses a structured integrative synthesis with a diachronic orientation, drawing on a defined corpus of youth research in North Macedonia. Integrative synthesis is appropriate for bringing together findings from studies that address related substantive questions but differ in research design, youth subpopulations examined, sampling approaches, measures and periods of data collection (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Torraco, 2005). The corpus was purposively selected because the included studies address the article's research questions and empirical focus, including

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

youth transitions, education and employment, pandemic experiences, NEET status, participation, political representation, trust and future orientations. In addition, one or more authors of this article participated in the methodological design, fieldwork and/or data analysis of the studies included in the synthesis. This involvement enables an informed interpretation of the original research context, measures and findings, while all empirical claims remain anchored in the original reports and datasets.

The methodological boundaries of each source are retained, and findings are interpreted in relation to their original design, population, measures and data collection period. The aim is not to treat the available research as a single longitudinal dataset, but to develop an empirically grounded interpretation of broader continuities and changes that cannot be captured by any single study or cross-sectional survey wave, particularly when polycrisis is understood as a cumulative and evolving process. The 2018/2019 and 2024 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Youth Studies constitute the core comparative corpus. The 2018/2019 and 2024 studies are repeated cross-sectional surveys conducted with different samples. The 2013 wave, the first FES Macedonian youth study, provides a historical baseline for the national series but falls outside the article's empirical period; differences in the measurement of selected indicators also limit direct comparability. The series additionally reflects a generational shift, from predominantly Generation Y in 2013 towards increasing coverage of Generation Z in the later waves.

The regional FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024 provides a comparative context for the national findings (Hasanović et al., 2024). Complementary evidence comes from research on youth and COVID-19 (Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2021), the NEET control study (Stojceska et al., 2024), Youth Participation Index (YPI) monitoring for 2019–2024 (Youth Hub for Western Balkans and Türkiye Network, n.d.), analyses of youth representation in the 2024 parliamentary and 2025 local elections (Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2024; Topuzovska Latkovikj & Imeri, 2025).

The synthesis is organised around RQ1–RQ3. Direct comparisons between FES waves are restricted to indicators with sufficiently equivalent wording, response categories and reference populations. Complementary studies contextualise these findings, with YPI providing annual monitoring of participation opportunities. Sources retain their methodological boundaries and are neither statistically pooled nor treated as a single longitudinal dataset. No new estimates, weights or indices are calculated; reported values retain their original definitions and reporting bases.

Table 1.
Methodological characteristics and analytical role of the studies included in the synthesis

Study/source	Sample and design	Data collection/evidence	Role and comparability in this synthesis
FES Youth Study 2018/2019 (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019)	Ages 14–29; N = 1,038; stratified quota sample across eight statistical regions, gender, ethnicity and urban/rural residence.	CAPI, supplemented by ten semi-structured interviews.	Core comparative wave. Direct comparisons with 2024 are restricted to indicators with sufficiently equivalent wording, response categories and reference populations.
FES Youth Study 2024 (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024)	Ages 14–29; N = 504; quotas by gender, age, region and survey language, with a soft education quota.	40% CAWI and 60% CATI.	Latest core comparative wave. Comparisons account for differences in sampling and collection mode; the two waves involve different respondents and do not track individual trajectories.

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

Study/source	Sample and design	Data collection/evidence	Role and comparability in this synthesis
FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024 (Hasanović et al., 2024)	Comparative study of young people aged 14–29 across twelve countries, including North Macedonia.	Regional analysis of national FES surveys, with selected comparisons with the earlier regional wave.	Places national findings, particularly migration aspirations, in regional context. Overlaps with the national FES evidence; regional definitions and reporting bases are retained.
Youth and COVID-19: Republic of North Macedonia (Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2021)	Cross-sectional survey; ages 18–29; N = 1,155. Sampling procedure is not specified in the source report.	Survey of pandemic experiences concerning employment, income, education, relationships and wellbeing. Collection mode and fieldwork dates are not specified in the source report.	Provides complementary evidence on pandemic-related vulnerabilities. Findings are interpreted using their original respondent and subgroup bases, without direct trend comparisons with FES surveys.
Position of the NEET Youth in North Macedonia: Control Study (Stojceska et al., 2024)	Desk-based study of NEET youth; statistical indicators used in this article concern ages 15–29.	Synthesis of official statistics, research reports and policy documents, including evidence on NEET subgroups and institutional support.	Contextualises labour-market exclusion and inequalities by gender, age, region and care responsibilities. Indicators retain their original definitions and reference years.
Youth Participation Index: 2019–2024 monitoring (Youth Hub for Western Balkans and Türkiye Network, n.d.; published by Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation).	Annual monitoring based on aggregate indicators, primarily covering ages 15–29	Statistical and administrative evidence normalised against targets and aggregated into dimension scores.	Contextualises participation opportunities. Political–economic scores are distinguished from the full index incorporating social participation from 2021. Relevant temporal comparisons account for LFS methodological changes from 2021.
Youth in the 2024 Parliamentary Elections (Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2024)	Analysis of confirmed candidates and parliamentary membership before and after government formation; this article uses the 18–29 age group.	Official electoral and parliamentary records; content analysis of eight available electoral programmes and the government programme.	Examines youth access to candidacy and parliamentary representation. Percentages retain their respective candidate and parliamentary denominators.
Youth in the 2025 Local Elections (Topuzovska Latkovikj & Imeri, 2025)	Analysis of mayoral and council candidates and elected representatives; this article uses the 18–29 age group.	Official electoral lists and results.	Examines youth representation in local government. Candidate, council-list holder and elected-representative indicators retain their distinct denominators and reporting cutoff.

Source: Authors' compilation based on the studies referenced in this article.

These findings should be interpreted within the limits of a synthesis of published evidence. Differences in sampling design, age coverage, sample composition, survey modes and measurement limit comparability across sources, while missing data treatment and weighting remain those of the original studies. Aggregate findings cannot establish individual trajectories or causal relationships. The purposively selected corpus also limits coverage, and the findings should not be generalised beyond the populations and periods represented.

Youth transitions under cumulative constraints

Labour market indicators point to gradual, but uneven, improvement in young people's formal labour market position. The NEET rate among those aged 15–29 was 24.5 percent in 2019, rose to 26.2 percent in 2020, and decreased to 22.8 percent in 2022 (Stojceska et al., 2024). For 2024, the YPI monitoring report records a NEET rate of 22.6 percent and an unemployment rate of 23.4 percent among young people aged 15–29, drawing

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

on national Labour Force Survey data (Youth Hub for Western Balkans and Türkiye Network, n.d.). The direction of change is important, but the figures also show that more than one in five young people remained outside employment, education and training in 2024.

The NEET control study demonstrates why this aggregate rate cannot be interpreted as a uniform condition or as a simple measure of unsuccessful school-to-work transition. The NEET population comprises young people with different labour market positions and reasons for inactivity. In 2021, 39.7 percent of young NEETs had been unemployed for longer than one year, 22.1 percent were outside work and education because of family care responsibilities, and 16.2 percent were discouraged workers who had stopped looking for employment. Of those with care responsibilities, 96.7 percent were women (Stojceska et al., 2024). These findings point simultaneously to prolonged detachment from employment, gendered care obligations and withdrawal from job search in a context of limited perceived opportunities.

The risks were also unevenly distributed. In 2021, the NEET rate was higher among women than men (26.1 percent and 22.4 percent respectively), higher among young people aged 25–29 than among those aged 15–24 (34.4 percent and 17.8 percent), and higher among young people in the North-East region (39.7 percent) (Stojceska et al., 2024). The significance of the NEET category, therefore, lies not only in its overall level but in its concentration among young people facing intersecting constraints related to gender, age, care responsibilities, place of residence and long-term exclusion from the labour market.

The FES studies add a related dimension of delayed autonomy. Living with parent(s) remained widespread, reported by 77.3 percent of young people in 2018/2019 and at least 75.2 percent in 2024 (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024). Co-residence may reflect family solidarity and housing preferences, but its continuing prevalence must also be read alongside limited access to stable employment, adequate income and independent housing. Taken together, the evidence indicates that declining unemployment and NEET rates have not automatically produced secure and self-directed transitions to adulthood.

Education, employment and youth socio-economic positioning

Education and employment are central domains of young people's socio-economic positioning. Between the two FES waves, confidence in the quality of education declined: the mean assessment of education quality fell from m=2.6 in 2018/2019 to m=2.1 in 2024 (on a 5-point scale), while the share of respondents dissatisfied with its quality increased from 43.6 percent to 60.6 percent (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024).

Perceptions of educational integrity also deteriorated. Agreement with the statement that grades and examinations are bought in educational institutions increased from 54.9 percent in 2018/2019 to 68.8 percent in 2024 (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024). This is a perception measure rather than an indicator of respondents' direct experience of corruption. Nevertheless, where grades and credentials are widely perceived as subject to such practices, effort and achievement may appear insufficiently rewarded, weakening confidence in merit as a principle of educational advancement.

Perceptions of unfairness also extend to expectations of labour market entry. In 2018/2019, 45 percent of young people preferred public sector employment; by 2024, this had decreased to 30.9 percent, while private sector employment became the most preferred option, at 36.6 percent. This change in preference did not remedy the perception that connections with influential persons and officials matter more than expertise in obtaining employment (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019;

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024). From a human resource management perspective, perceived fairness in recruitment and career advancement is closely linked to work motivation and career planning. In this context, perceptions of non-meritocratic recruitment may also weaken trust in the fairness and responsiveness of institutions.

The mismatch between education and work remains pronounced. In 2024, 68.1 percent considered curricula inadequate preparation for work, while 45.3 percent of employed respondents reported that they did not work in their profession (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024). The COVID-19 study further documented economic vulnerability: more than one third of respondents reported lower personal income, 35 percent reported difficulties paying utility bills, and 16 percent of unemployed respondents reported having lost their job because of COVID-19 (Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2021). The evidence therefore does not support a simple narrative of either deterioration or improvement. Rather, it points to a persistent gap between aggregate labour market recovery and young people's access to secure, fair and merit-based routes to autonomy.

Migration aspirations and the search for a viable future

Migration aspirations are an important indicator of how young people assess their future opportunities at home and abroad. At the national level, the share of young people expressing a moderate, strong or very strong desire to emigrate increased from 62 percent in 2018/2019 to 67.7 percent in 2024 (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024).

The regional FES comparison places North Macedonia in a particularly exposed position. In 2024, the reported shares expressing a strong or very strong desire to emigrate totalled 42.4 percent, the highest proportion among the twelve countries compared. Among respondents willing to emigrate who specified the intended duration of their time abroad, the share anticipating a very long or permanent stay increased from 51.2 percent in 2018 to 54.2 percent in 2024 (Hasanović et al., 2024, pp. 77, 81)[1]. The cross-country comparison presented in the national study also identifies North Macedonia as the only country with a mean migration-desire score above the scale midpoint of 3 (M = 3.25 on a 1–5 scale), (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024, pp. 23–25). These findings indicate both widespread migration aspirations and comparatively strong interest in extended stays abroad.

The 2024 national study identifies a combination of perceived pull factors abroad and domestic push factors among young people with a moderate, strong or very strong desire to emigrate. The principal pull factors were an improved standard of living (30.5 percent), higher salaries (14.2 percent), better employment opportunities (9.9 percent), and social and political stability in the destination country (7.7 percent). Corruption and clientelism in the home country constituted the principal directly reported push factor (12.9 percent) (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024).

Migration aspirations express more than a search for higher income. Both the 2018/2019 and 2024 studies indicate that young people view their personal future more optimistically than the future of Macedonian society over the next decade (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024). This contrast suggests that personal aspirations can coexist with limited confidence in the country's future. Within the context of polycrisis, migration aspirations can therefore be interpreted as a search for opportunities to realise these ambitions amid accumulated uncertainty.

[1] The national figure of 67.7 percent includes moderate, strong and very strong responses and retains non-responses in the reporting base. The regional comparison excludes non-responses and combines only strong and very strong responses. Intended duration of stay is a separate measure among potential migrants who specified that duration.

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

Participation, representation and youth influence

The FES evidence points to a persistent gap between political interest, aspirations for having a voice and perceived representation. In 2018/2019, interest in local politics was 22.8 percent and in national politics 20.5 percent; despite this, 73 percent thought young people should have more opportunities to have their say. In 2024, only seven percent believed that young people's interests were represented in politics (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024).

This does not mean that young people are indifferent to public life. Rather, the FES findings identify participation as a democratic ideal distinct from party politics as a field that many young people perceive as compromised by pressure, clientelism and limited opportunities for meaningful influence. The 2018/2019 and 2024 studies indicate a low level of trust in parties and institutions, but also support for voting, direct democracy and greater opportunities for young people to have their say (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024). These findings suggest that a low level of trust in parties and institutions coexists with young people's wish for meaningful influence, rather than simply indicating disinterest in public affairs.

Recent electoral analyses provide a concrete institutional picture. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, young candidates aged 18 to 29 made up 14.6 percent of confirmed candidates, but only 2.5 percent of elected Members of Parliament (MPs) after government formation. In the 2025 local elections, there were no young elected mayors aged 18 to 29. Young people were present on council lists, but only 8.3 percent of lead candidates on council lists were young; young people made up 14.9 percent of elected councillors (Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2024; Topuzovska Latkovikj & Imeri, 2025).

The annual YPI monitoring shows fluctuation rather than sustained improvement. In the report's political–economic series, North Macedonia's score declined from 56.4 in 2019 to 50.9 in 2020, then moved to 54.4 in 2021, 52.6 in 2022, 56.1 in 2023 and 56.4 in 2024. Thus, by 2024 it had returned to its pre-pandemic level, but without evidence of cumulative progress. Social participation was added as a separate dimension from 2021; the full three-dimensional YPI consequently provides a more complete picture only for the later period. Its overall value changed only marginally from 64.2 in 2023 to 64.3 in 2024 (Youth Hub for Western Balkans and Türkiye Network, n.d.).

In the 2024 regional comparison, North Macedonia's overall YPI value of 64.3 placed it below Montenegro (69.7) and Serbia (68.7), but above Türkiye (59.9). Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina have only political–economic scores in this edition and are therefore excluded from this comparison of full indices. Political participation (42.5) remained markedly lower than economic (70.2) and social participation (80.1), while active youth structures were identified in only 32 percent of municipalities. Together with the FES finding that only seven percent of young people felt represented in politics, these results point to a persistent gap between formal participation mechanisms and meaningful youth influence (Youth Hub for Western Balkans and Türkiye Network, n.d.; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024). YPI values are index scores describing opportunities for participation, not percentages of young people participating. Indicators are scored against specified targets and averaged within each dimension; the overall YPI is the arithmetic mean of the three-dimension scores. For missing values, the report uses the latest available prior observation (Youth Hub for Western Balkans and Türkiye Network, n.d., pp. 8–9).

Trust, insecurity and European integration

Attitudes towards European integration became markedly more divided between the two FES youth studies. Support for North Macedonia's membership of the European Union was 81 percent

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

in 2018/2019. In 2024, 41.7 percent of young people agreed that the country should join the European Union, 37.9 percent disagreed, and 20.4 percent did not express a view (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024).

Young people in North Macedonia reported considerably greater trust in family (m=4.8) than in formal institutions in 2018/2019 (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019). Across the two FES waves, mean trust in political parties declined from m=2.00 to m=1.86, in the Government from m=2.22 to m=1.93, and in Parliament from m=2.21 to m=2.00. By contrast, trust in the Army increased from m=2.87 to m=3.02 and in NATO from m=2.6 to m=2.7, while trust in the European Union remained virtually unchanged (m=2.72 and m=2.71, respectively). The 2024 study also records a relatively high level of trust in the religious institution to which respondents belong (m=3.18). Trust was measured on a five-point scale. These findings indicate a persistent low level of trust in representative political institutions, alongside more favourable assessments of some other institutions (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024).

The 2018/2019 and 2024 FES Youth Studies point to the continuity of young people's fears and concerns. Across both survey waves, young people reported a broad and persistent range of concerns, indicating that insecurity remains a continuous feature of their assessments of present conditions and future prospects. Eight items were measured on the same three-point scale in both waves. Their mean values were somewhat lower in the 2024 survey, but all eight remained above m=2. Comparable concerns included pollution and climate change (m=2.60 to m=2.43), having no job (m=2.50 to m=2.39), serious illness (m=2.60 to m=2.36), war in the region or world (m=2.50 to m=2.29), and a terrorist attack (m=2.50 to m=2.19). The 2024 study also records concerns not included in the earlier wave, particularly poor healthcare (m=2.63), lack of a decent pension (m=2.37) and a global pandemic (m=2.24). Overall, the findings indicate a continuing multidimensional pattern of environmental, economic, health and security-related insecurity among young people (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2024).

Discussion and conclusions

The changing realities of Macedonian young people are characterised by persistent constraints and uneven change across different areas of life. Improvements in labour market indicators accompany educational dissatisfaction, doubts about merit, limited political influence and strong migration aspirations. Bringing these dimensions together shows why changes in formal opportunities need to be examined alongside young people's confidence in their capacity to build a viable future.

Regarding RQ1, the findings indicate enduring multidimensional insecurity without a uniform intensification of concerns. Comparable fears remained elevated but were somewhat lower in 2024. One possible interpretation is that for young people socialised amid recurrent economic and political instability, recent disruptions are experienced as extensions of familiar insecurity rather than a wholly new condition. From a generational perspective, uncertainty may already form part of the background against which opportunities and futures are assessed (Mannheim, 1952; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Limited change in some indicators may therefore coexist with substantial cumulative pressures. This interpretation does not establish habituation or imply that young people are unaffected: differences in survey mode, sample composition and the immediate salience of particular concerns may also contribute. For the study of youth and polycrisis, the case highlights the importance of examining how newer disruptions enter already insecure social contexts, alongside the interactions between crises emphasised by Lawrence et al. (2024).

Regarding RQ2, aggregate labour market improvement does not establish that transitions

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M. & Starova Spiroska, N. (2026). Changing Realities of Macedonian Youth: Polycrisis, Participation and Aspirations. *Youth in Central and Eastern Europe. 13*(21). https://doi.org/10.24917/ycee.12960

to adulthood have become secure or equitable. Educational mismatch and perceived non-meritocratic recruitment raise questions about whether qualifications and effort translate into attainable opportunities. The life course distinction between transitions and trajectories directs attention beyond entry into employment towards sustained occupational development and autonomy (Elder, 1985). Family support can buffer insecurity, while prolonged dependence may constrain independent choices. Gendered care responsibilities and regional inequalities show further differentiation between these pathways. Exposure to shared uncertainty does not imply an equal capacity to manage its consequences: resources and responsibilities shape whose aspirations remain achievable (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

Regarding RQ3, the central issue is whether institutions provide credible channels through which young people can influence their collective future. Limited representation and low institutional trust, alongside demands for greater opportunities for young people to have their say, suggest a gap between expectations of participation and opportunities to exercise influence. The divergence between EU trust and membership support also suggests that confidence in an institution and commitment to a particular political future are distinct dimensions of young people's orientations. Read together with migration aspirations, these findings raise the question of whether young people perceive greater scope for advancing their lives through individual mobility than through collective change. This remains an interpretive proposition, as the synthesis does not establish an individual-level relationship between political disengagement and migration intentions.

Taken together, the article connects polycrisis, participation and aspirations through the unequal conditions of becoming adult. Its contribution to debates on young people in Central and Eastern Europe is to show how continuity in insecurity can coexist with changing expectations and strategies. Longitudinal and qualitative research could examine whether recurrent crises become normalised in everyday experience and how this affects participation and mobility decisions. Policy responses should address the barriers identified across education, employment and socio-political participation: the mismatch between education and work, perceived non-meritocratic recruitment, unequal care responsibilities and young people's limited influence. Their effectiveness should be assessed not only through improved aggregate indicators, but also through young people's opportunities to achieve economic security, exercise autonomy and influence public decisions.

References

Agency for Youth and Sport. (2016). *National youth strategy 2016–2025*.

Agency for Youth and Sport. (2023). *National youth strategy 2023–2027*.

Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. (2020). Law on youth participation and youth policies. *Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia*, No. 10/2020.

Elder, G. H., Jr. (Ed.). (1985). *Life course dynamics: Trajectories and transitions, 1968–1980*. Cornell University Press.

European Commission. (2025). *North Macedonia 2025 report*.

Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2007). *Young people and social change: New perspectives* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.

Hagestad, G. O., & Neugarten, B. L. (1985). Age and the life course. In R. H. Binstock & E. Shanas (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and the social sciences* (2nd ed., pp. 35–61). Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Hasanović, J., Lavrič, M., Adilović, E., & Stanojević, D. (2024). *Youth study Southeast Europe 2024: Independent but concerned: The voices of young people in Southeast Europe*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/content/titleinfo/1571903

Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., Janzwood, S., Rockström, J., Renn, O., & Donges, J. F. (2024). Global polycrisis: The causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability, 7*, Article e6. https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2024.1

Mannheim, K. (1952). The problem of generations. In P. Kecskemeti (Ed.), *Essays on the sociology of knowledge* (pp. 276–322). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Price, S. J., McKenry, P. C., & Murphy, M. J. (Eds.). (2000). *Families across time: A life course perspective*. Roxbury Publishing Company.

Stojceska, B., Dukovska, B., & Topuzovska Latkovikj, M. (2024). *Position of the NEET youth in North Macedonia: Control study*. Youth Alliance Krusevo.

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M. (2021). *Youth and COVID-19: Republic of North Macedonia* [Country research report prepared for the British Council].

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M. (2024). *Mladite na izborite: Analiza za pozicijata na mladite na parlamentarnite izbori 2024* [Youth in elections: Analysis of the position of young people in the 2024 parliamentary elections]. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M., Naumovska, B., & Starova, N. (2024). *Youth study North Macedonia 2024: Navigating discontent: Youth perspectives on education, employment, and migration*.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/21550

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M., Serafimovska, E., Cekikj, A., & Starova, N. (2019). *Youth study North Macedonia 2018/2019*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., & Imeri, L. (2025). *Mladite na izborite: Analiza za pozicijata na mladite na lokalnite izbori 2025* [Youth in elections: Analysis of the position of young people in the 2025 local elections]. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

Torraco, R. J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review, 4*(3), 356–367. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283

Whittemore, R., & Knafl, K. (2005). The integrative review: Updated methodology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 52*(5), 546–553. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x

Woodman, D., & Wyn, J. (2015). *Youth and generation: Rethinking change and inequality in the lives of young people*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473910591

Youth Hub for Western Balkans and Türkiye Network. (n.d.). *Youth participation index 2024: Monitoring report of political, social and economic participation of youth* (Vol. 9). Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation. https://www.partnersalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/YP-2024-Regional-volume9_web.pdf