



NEW  
HOPE  
FOR

COOPERATION?

PERCEPTIONS OF  
YOUNG PEOPLE FROM  
GREECE AND  
NORTH MACEDONIA



COOPERATION  
FOR A  
COMMON FUTURE



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This analysis and report is part of the project for the process of establishing of Hellenic-North Macedonia Youth Cooperation Offices, implemented by Youth Alliance Krushevo and made possible with the financial support of the United States of America Embassy in North Macedonia and the German Embassy in North Macedonia. The project aims to bring young people from both countries closer together and create the right circumstances for youth to have an institutional way to meet each other.

# METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

## THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS RESEARCH

The core idea behind this research is to better understand young people and their perception of the relation between the two countries, Greece and North Macedonia. Furthermore, the goal was to get an overview of how relevant stakeholders and youth cooperate between the two countries and draw conclusions that will give us further arguments towards the main aim of the project. The main aim of the project is to establish bilateral youth cooperation offices between North Macedonia and Greece, by mobilizing young people & stakeholders by giving them the right tools to meet and build cooperation among them.

**However, this research is not based on a representative sample of young people from both countries, but rather a small fragment of views from young people who are active on social media and are related to the partner organizations implementing this project and research. The second aspect of our data gathering were interviews with relevant stakeholders which have a proven track record in cooperation with partners from both countries.**

## INSTRUMENTS USED

### PRIMARY DATA

To achieve the objective of the research, the research team drafted and put in place an online questionnaire on the platform Lime Survey. Before the distribution of the questionnaire, the research team tested the platform and the questionnaire to finalize the final comments. Furthermore, the questionnaire was designed in two languages, Greek and Macedonian to reach people who do not necessarily speak or are fluent in English. Also, the questionnaire was designed for youth aged from 15 to 35. Although in both countries the standard for youth 15 to 29, we opted to push the age limit to 35 since the economic factors relate to postponed adolescence.

The questionnaire was then distributed through the social media networks of Youth Alliance Krushevo; Inter Alia Athens and UNESCO Youth Club of Thessaloniki. Secondly, we send direct emails to more than 500 young people and young people who are still in the formal education (high school students & students). Furthermore, the link to the questionnaire was also sent by direct interactions with youth groups from both countries. All in all, 1180 people have opened the link and 690 young people have answered and completed the questionnaire. Out of those 690, 220 completed questionnaires are Greek and 470 are answered in Macedonian. The research team then analyzed the data for any “troll” answers or testing answers which might influence the analysis of the final data. Through this process 20 completed questionnaires have been deleted.

Finally, the research team decided to even out the number of questionnaires from both countries to have comparable data from both countries. This meant that only the first 219 answers from North Macedonia are taken into consideration in this paper. The team decided that this way forward would also prevent the final analysis to be dominated by answers from North Macedonia.

The statistical analysis of the data was done with the help of the IBM SPSS analyzing tool for Windows PC.

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering, but active interactions between two, or more, people, leading to negotiated, contextually-based results. In that sense the through carefully selected respondents from different professional and institutional backgrounds we got a more complete picture concerning the cooperation between the two countries.

Therefore, interviews were organized with key stakeholders concerned to understand institutional settings, respond to cooperation between the two countries, identify obstacles and trends. The use of a more open framework allowed focused yet conversational communication and was useful for collecting information about historical events, opinions, interpretations, meanings; but also generate ideas and assumptions about the cooperation between North Macedonia and Greece.

It is expected that at least 8 semi-structured interviews per country were conducted with different stakeholders to cover all aspects of violence against women and will be grouped in the following categories:

1. *Institutions or former members of state institutions*, from local municipalities or state-funded institutions that are close to the border.
2. *Organizations*, like businesses that have a financial benefit of the cooperation of the two countries.
3. *NGOs and other organizations* working with youth or youth-related issues; representatives of CSOs that research bilateral issues and conduct research on the topic
4. *Individuals/professors/politicians*, individuals that due to their workplace are or were in close contact with the issue between North Macedonia and Greece.

## FOCUS GROUPS

With the focus groups, we explored the beliefs, practices, and ideas of a variety of young people from both countries. 4 of such were organized and analyzed for the needs of this report, two from each country. This method was particularly useful to observe the debate between youngsters and letting them discuss their views with their peers. Furthermore, this method allowed them to be more open and direct in their views, with their anonymity guaranteed by the research team. For this method, ZOOM conference calls have been used and recorded. Later on, the discussions have been transcribed and analyzed by the team.

# CONTEXT & SHORT SUMMARY

## THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS RESEARCH

Although direct neighbours, Greece and North Macedonia have had a long-standing issue for the name "Macedonia" ever since the formal establishment of the Peoples Republic of Macedonia and then the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in the Yugoslav federation. This issue prevailed after the independence of North Macedonia from Yugoslavia, resulting in a complete embargo in February 1994<sup>1</sup>, and an interim accord in 1995<sup>2</sup> which resulted in changes to the constitution and change of flag in North Macedonia. This accord also guaranteed no interference of Greece in the accession of North Macedonia to the UN and is registered as "Former Yugoslav Republic of North Macedonia".

Although after the signature of the interim accord both sides agreed to further negotiations, with the help of the U.N mandated mediator Matthew Nimitz<sup>3</sup>, little had changed in the years to come. Nationalism in both countries was on the rise which brought no progress or even a backsliding of the progress of the 90s. No progress also meant that North Macedonia was being blocked by the objection to the membership to NATO by Greece in 2008<sup>4</sup>. After the blockade for the accession into NATO, the government in North Macedonia decided to invest in the controversial project to rebuild the main square in Skopje with mainly Hellenic sculptures, including gigantic statues of Alexander the Great and his father Filip the second. This project was called "Skopje 2014", and although the main argument at that time was that this is needed for more tourism, in essence, it highlighted the new pathway that the government was willing to take<sup>5</sup>. This situation also resulted in a stalemate situation for the aspirations of North Macedonia on joining the EU, becoming a candidate country in 2005<sup>6</sup> but not being granted the status of candidate country until 2020 once the name issue had been resolved.

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<sup>1</sup>Greek blockade, U.N Embargo threaten Macedonia's future, Washington Post, Steve Vogel, May 1994 available here <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/05/25/greek-blockade-un-embargo-threaten-macedonias-future/ba3ebab3-8035-44cd-8853-4f0f7b768b23/>

<sup>2</sup>Interim accord between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, September 1995 available at <https://peacemaker.un.org/greecefrom-interimaccord95>

<sup>3</sup><https://dppa.un.org/en/mission/personal-envoy-greece-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia>

<sup>4</sup>NATO setback upsets Macedonia's EU hopes, EUROACTIVE, April 2008, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/nato-setback-upsets-macedonia-s-eu-hopes/>

<sup>5</sup>Troubles with history Skopje 2014, Artmargins.com, December 2019, available <https://artmargins.com/troubles-with-history-skopje-2014/>

<sup>6</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/north-macedonia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/north-macedonia_en)

## THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS RESEARCH(continued)

The name issue was resolved with the so-called "Prespa" Agreement<sup>7</sup> signed in June 2018 and becoming effective after the vote for ratification in both Parliaments in February 2019<sup>8</sup>. In essence, North Macedonia agreed to change its name and in return, Greece would lift all blockades to the aspirations of North Macedonia for its full membership in NATO and the EU. However, the agreement also included measures for bringing both countries closer together and finding new ways for cooperation in the business sectors, but also bringing young people from both countries closer together by establishing bilateral youth cooperation offices between the countries. These actions are foreseen in the action plan for the implementation of the Prespa agreement<sup>9</sup>.

Cooperation between North Macedonia and Greece is still a topic that can bring negative reactions from certain groups in both countries. However, what we have tried to show in this report is that cooperation is already happening, in different aspects and forms. Although we have to yet see the fruits of the Prespa agreement, we tried to focus on the existing forms of cooperation between the two countries, the perception of youth on cooperation, and what we can take moving forward as positive examples for youth cooperation.

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<sup>7</sup>Called Prespa agreement since it was signed on the Lake Prespa which is in the border region between North Macedonia and Greece.

<sup>8</sup>Government of the Republic of North Macedonia information on the Prespa Agreement <https://vlada.mk/node/16896?ln=en-gb> <sup>9</sup>Government of North Macedonia, [https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/PrespaDogovor/1.2\\_action\\_plan\\_-\\_final\\_agreement\\_-\\_english.pdf](https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/PrespaDogovor/1.2_action_plan_-_final_agreement_-_english.pdf)



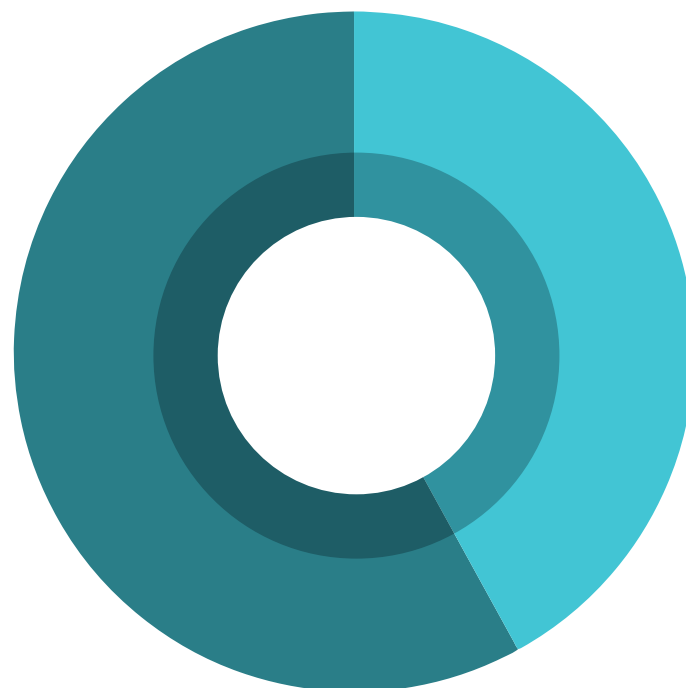
Through our interviews, focus groups, and quantitative data we have learned that:

- There are already existing forms of cooperation, from local municipalities to different state institutions working together on a variety of topics, especially in the border region. Cultural state institutions foster cooperation between the two countries, exchanging expertise and knowledge with each other. Such cooperation is mostly funded by the Cross-Border IPA 2 of the EU funds.
- There are no or few state-funded initiatives for cooperation between the two countries.
- Young people do not have a clear mechanism for cooperation and are left to sporadic youth exchanges, study visits, or conferences organized by youth organizations, either through Erasmus+ projects or other foreign donors.
- Young people, especially those who have studied in the other respected country, are a positive example of how young people can contribute to cooperation and foster close contacts across the border. Students from both sides have big positive stories of their experience.
- Businesses are cooperating in a variety of ways and forms, although driven by profit.
- Young people from Greece rarely have travelled to North Macedonia, which is a sign of the lack of opportunities and lack of information. On the other hand, young people from North Macedonia travel regularly in big numbers to Greece, based mostly on tourism or seasonal work. Not having the chance to meet increases the chances for the prevalence of stereotypes. Contrary to that, meeting and getting to know each other breaks hard rooted stereotypes.
- Young people from both countries would like to travel and get to know each other in a variety of activities. But mostly on the getting to know the other country through sightseeing and joint travel activities.
- They believe that there is a cooperation between the two countries is high among youth. This is a positive playing field for future steps for cooperation.
- Youth should be given the voice to create better mechanisms for cooperation, especially in regards to their cooperation.
- The reported friendships from young people from both countries are based on having the opportunity to meet and talk. A lot of the respondents still keep in touch with their peers from other countries based on their joint experience on projects, conferences, or study visits.

# DEMOGRAPHICS

The research was designed to cover young people between the age of 15 and 35 years, thus limiting the possibility for people beyond those age groups to participate. The goal was to analyze youth perceptions, thus the limitation in age. The mean age of the participants is 24.04 years, with a standard deviation of 5.8. This means that we had a quite aged mix sample to work with.

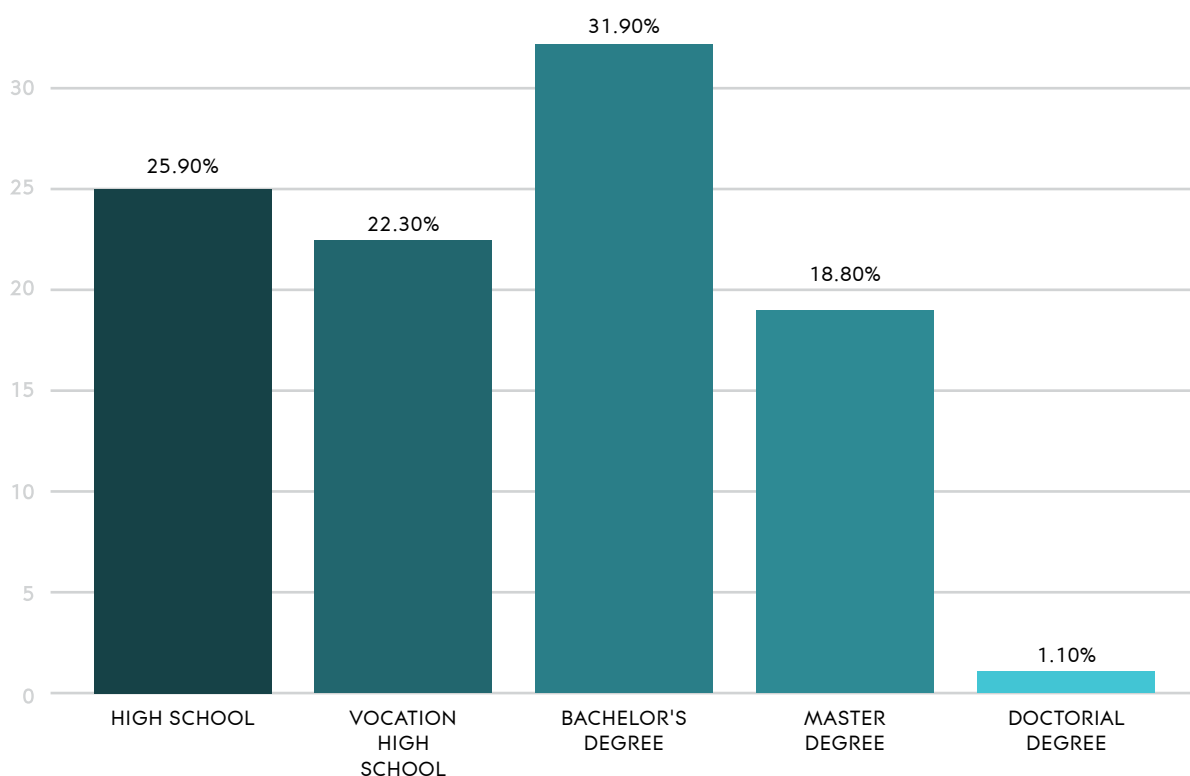
Furthermore, the places of living of the participants are wide-spread in both countries. Most of the young people in the sample live in the larger cities of both countries, that being Skopje, Thessaloniki, or Athens. In other words, 58% of young people in the sample have noted that they live in those cities. On the other hand, 42% of the participants answered that they currently live in other municipalities.



58%  
■ SKOPJE;  
THESSALONIKI;  
ATHENS

42%  
■ OTHER MUNICIPALITIES

The last finished formal education of the participants is as seen in table 2. There are however differences by country. In North Macedonia, there is a higher percentage of youth that noted that their last finished education is standard high school at a much higher rate. On the other hand, youth from Greece participating in this sample have noted at a higher rate than their last finished formal education in vocational high school. This is due to the difference in terms of educational systems in both countries.

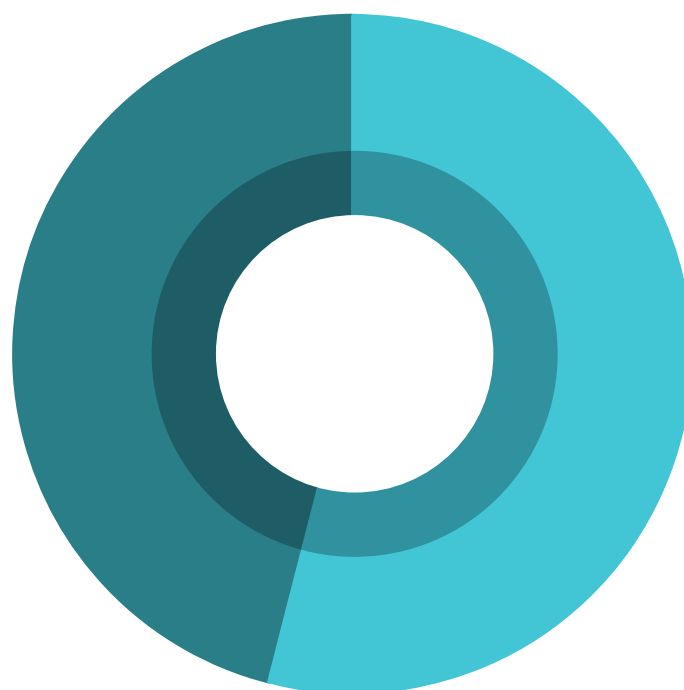


#### LAST FINISHED FORMAL EDUCATION

More importantly, we have to keep in mind that the sample is relatively young, so we did not expect the people in this study to have a higher degree. Thus the question of what their last finished formal education is. All in all, we can conclude that youth from both countries are still in the educational period of their lives, but one-third of them already have a Bachelor's degree.

In terms of employment, we asked the participants if they have paid work. The situation in both countries in terms of youth unemployment is rather alarming, having the top unemployment rates in Europe. 46% of the participants have noted that they have a paid job, 54% have noted that they do not have a paid job. In both countries, the numbers are the same, **which is an interesting overview and a possibility for cooperation specifically on this topic.** However, these results should be taken with reservations, since this is not a representative study on youth.

#### DO YOU HAVE A PAID JOB?



46%

I HAVE  
A PAID JOB

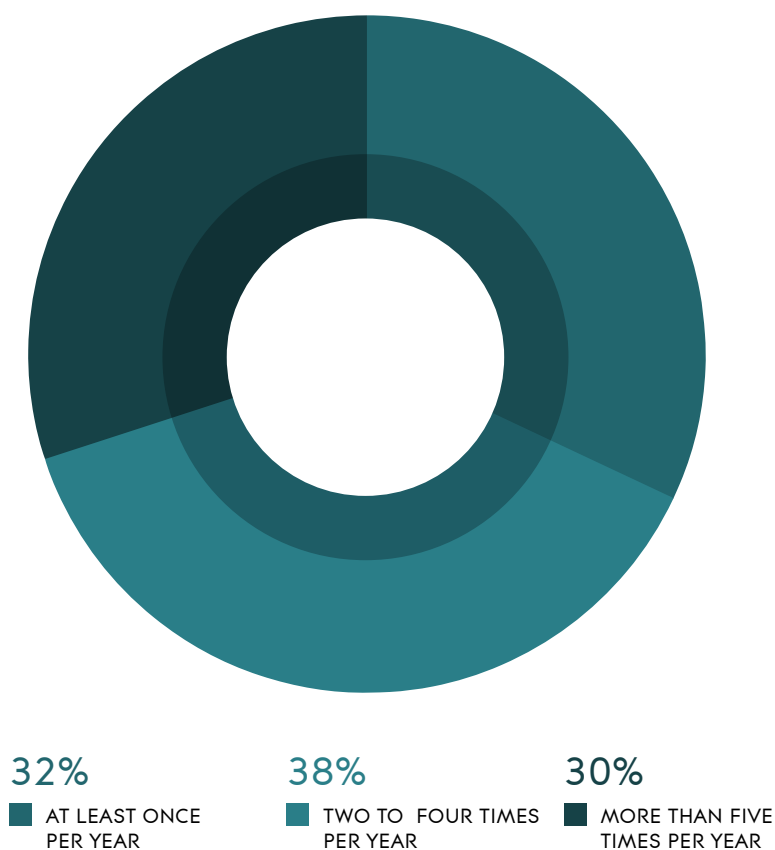
54%

I DO NOT HAVE  
A PAID JOB

We also asked participants about their parental status. A small number of participants, less than 5% have noted that they have children. This question was interesting since we wanted to observe if and how the values of young parents would be transmitted to their children. However, since the number of participants with children is so low, we could not analyze this element, at least not in this survey.

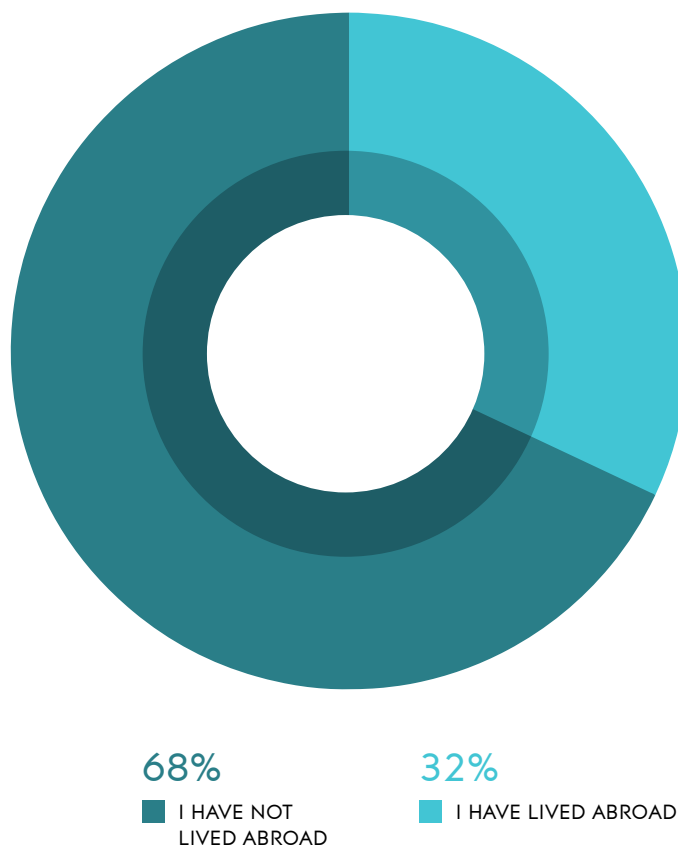
Lastly, we also asked participants in the survey about their habits of traveling. The logic behind these questions is to find out if people who are more frequent travelers have different views and values in terms of cooperation between North Macedonia. In terms of numbers, youth mobility is quite high. **95.1% of the participants in the survey have reported that they have traveled in their life. 95% of the respondents have traveled in the last 5 years.** In terms of how often they travel, the numbers say that the respondents most of the time travel two to four times per week. However, the percentages for each group are quite close and there is no real statistical difference between any of them.

#### HOW OFTEN PER YEAR DO YOU TRAVEL?



We also asked participants if they had ever lived abroad. This was interesting for us to see if this plays any role in the views of young people. In terms of numbers, there is no difference between the respondents from both countries. In both countries, one-third of the participants have said that they have lived abroad. However, we could not conclusively say if this had played any role in terms of their views since the sample size is low.

### HAVE YOU EVER LIVED ABROAD?

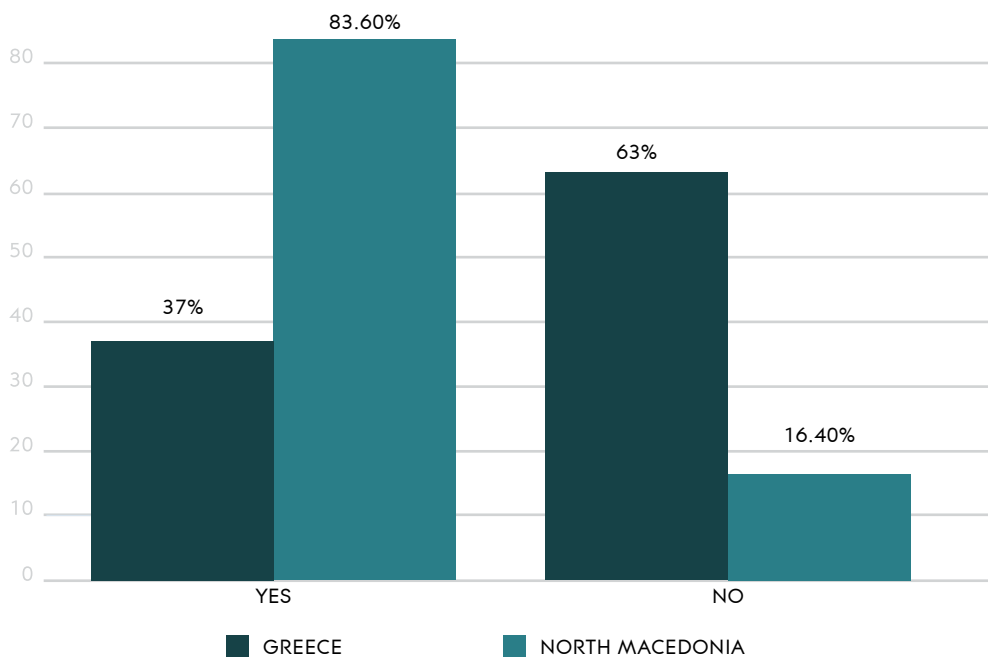


Although at the beginning of our quantitative research we had a firm belief that some of the core demographics will play a role in the perception of young people on the topic of cooperation, we could not conclude any specific statistical difference between the groups. In other words, we could not conclude that young respondents who don't have a job would feel a certain way with high probability. Or that someone who has a high school diploma as their highest achieved academic title would have negative feelings towards cooperation with the neighbor.

# MAIN FINDINGS

## THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS RESEARCH

In terms of the main findings, we have concentrated our analysis towards finding out if young people have met each other between the two countries. Furthermore, we asked them if they have friends from the other side of the border, how they would rate the cooperation between the two countries, how they feel when they meet people who are not from their culture/state, and who they think should work more on cooperation between the two countries.

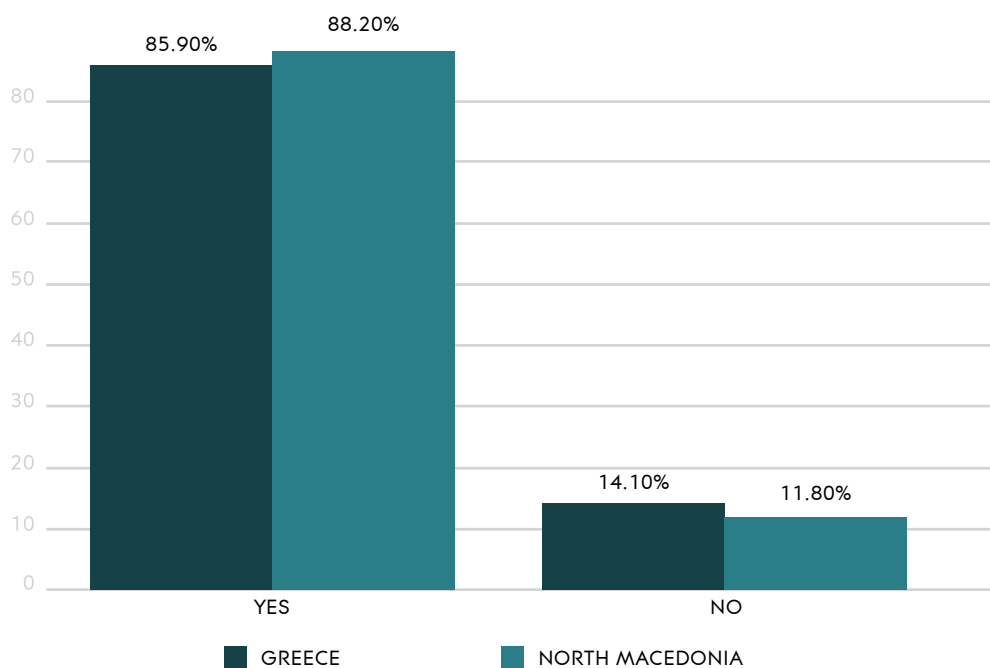


HAVE YOU EVER TRAVELED TO NORTH MACEDONIA/GREECE

Unsurprisingly, young respondents from North Macedonia have visited Greece in a higher number than Greek respondents have visited North Macedonia. **Almost 85% of respondents from North Macedonia have visited Greece in some form.** This is because Greece has been the most popular tourist destination for many years. This also reflects in our summary, as one of the questions in the survey the question was why you have traveled, and almost all respondents from North Macedonia noted that they had traveled for touristic reasons to Greece. **Furthermore, from the 12% of the respondents from North Macedonia that have never traveled to Greece, 95% have said that if they could, they would travel to Greece.**

**On the other hand, respondents from Greece have significantly traveled less to North Macedonia.** More than 60% of the respondents have never been to North Macedonia. This indicates that the information and possibilities to travel to North Macedonia are rare and scarce. Furthermore, the focus groups and direct interviews indicate that Greece itself sees their interest in the other European countries, rather than the Balkan countries. This could mean that in a sense, the Balkan countries, including North Macedonia are not seen as a "natural" connection for cooperation or travel. On the other hand, the focus groups from North Macedonia showed that they perceive Greece as part of the region and that cooperation is needed in the region first. This is an interesting trend to see in both countries which should be researched furthermore, as both countries are geographically on the same peninsula. But in the perception of the public, this could be very different.

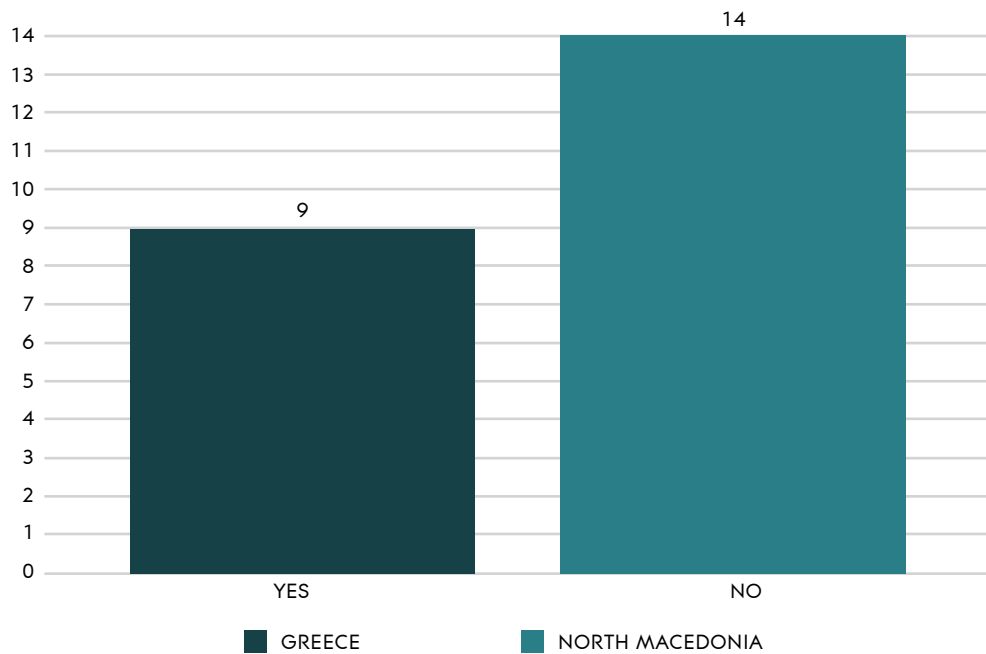




### IF YOU COULD, WOULD YOU TRAVEL TO GREECE/NORTH MACEDONIA

Although there is a difference between the actual travel to each other's country, as noted before, in the sense of willingness to travel, respondents from both countries are open to traveling to the other country. In a statistical sense, there is no significant difference between the percentages from both countries. **The vast majority of respondents would travel to the other country if they could.**

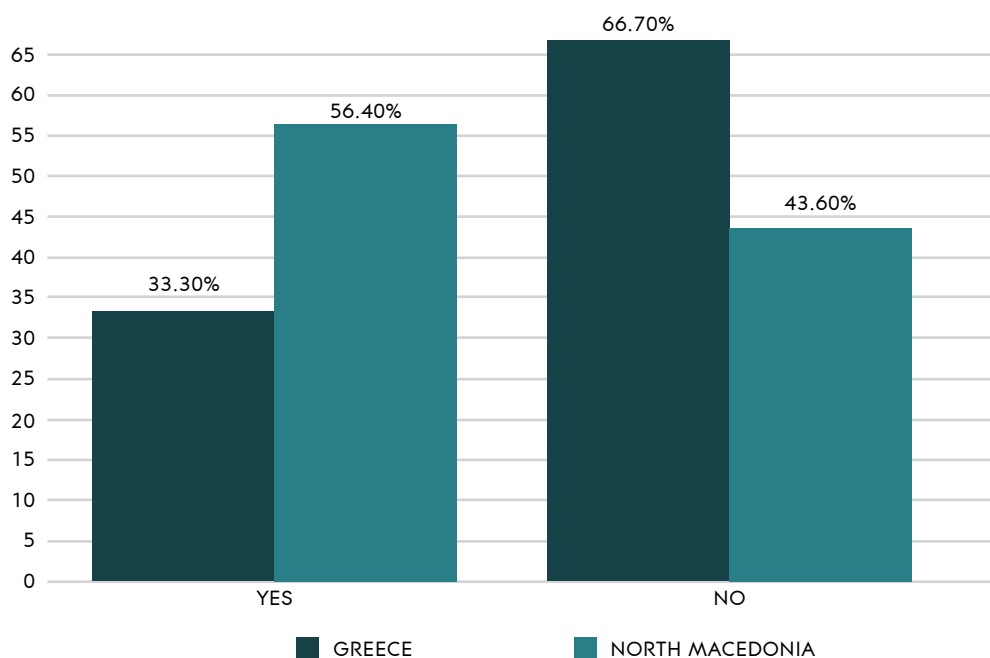
**Keeping in mind that the respondents from Greece have traveled less to North Macedonia, this is an encouraging sign. Not having the right circumstances and possibilities might affect the actual travel, but also stereotypes could play an important role.** But the willingness to travel to the other side of the border is encouraging, especially for future programs that have the intention to bring youth closer from both sides. This means that there is potential, at least from the respondents' group, to break the ice and foster connectivity among the two countries.



HOW MANY PEOPLE DO YOU KNOW FROM GREECE/NORTH MACEDONIA

We also asked the respondents how many people they know, approximately from the other country. The table above is showing the mean of all respondents from each country. **Having in mind the previous tables and that respondents from North Macedonia travel more to Greece than the other way around, it is not surprising to see that respondents from North Macedonia have reported knowing more people from the other country.**

Since we do not have any other data to compare to other countries, it is difficult to fully analyze what this means in the bigger picture of the cooperation between Greece and North Macedonia. However, the table below in terms of "friendships" gives us a better overview of the situation.

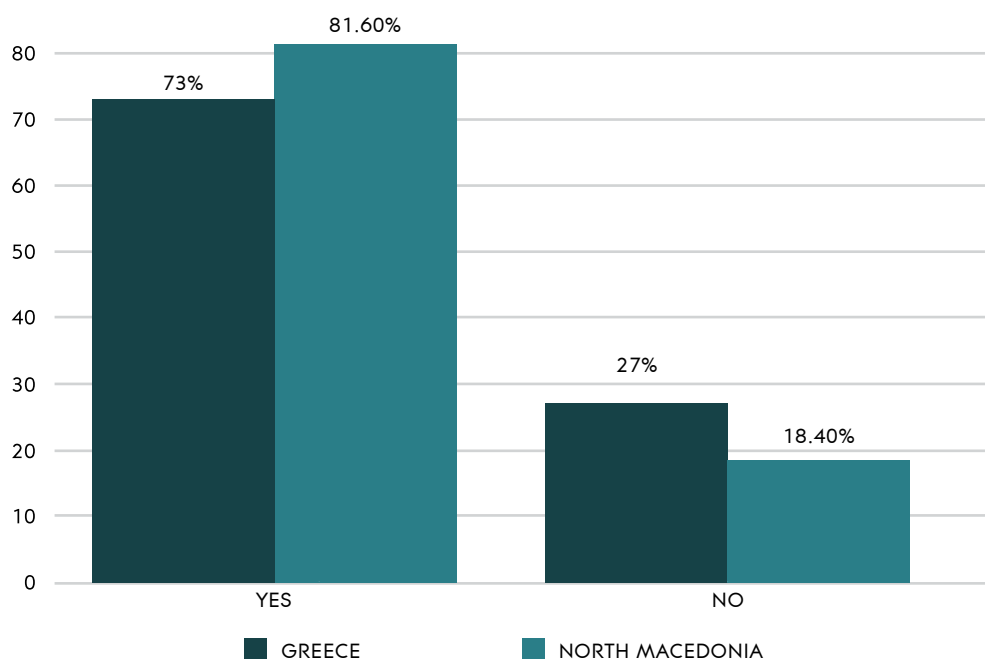


#### WOULD YOU SAY YOU HAVE FRIENDS IN NORTH MACEDONIA/GREECE

From the focus groups we also learned that **once young people from both countries have the chance to meet, new friendships rise.** Most of the participants have noted that their friendships with people from the other side of the border have developed through direct meetings or study visits. This indicates that the connections are made on the instances of meetings where young people will first have the chance to visit the neighboring country, but also interact on different topics. Furthermore, it also became clear that the youth generation is staying in touch much easier through social media, chatting on different occasions and platforms.

An interesting figure in terms of friendships is the fact that more than half of the respondents from North Macedonia would say that they have friends in Greece. Unsurprisingly on the other hand is the fact that Greek respondents have a lower percentage in terms of this since they have not traveled to North Macedonia at a much higher rate than the other way around. **Although correlation is not automatically causation of these figures, the figures coincide with the previous tables in the sense that it is impossible to have friends if you have not had the chance to meet.**

This segment alone tells us the story that in a sense, there is an unequal playing field in terms of actually having the opportunity to travel between the countries. Youth from North Macedonia is in the position to go to Greece, may that be only for vacation. However, what is more, important is the willingness of respondents from both countries to travel to the other side. And even more importantly, they are willing to work for better cooperation as noted in the segment below.

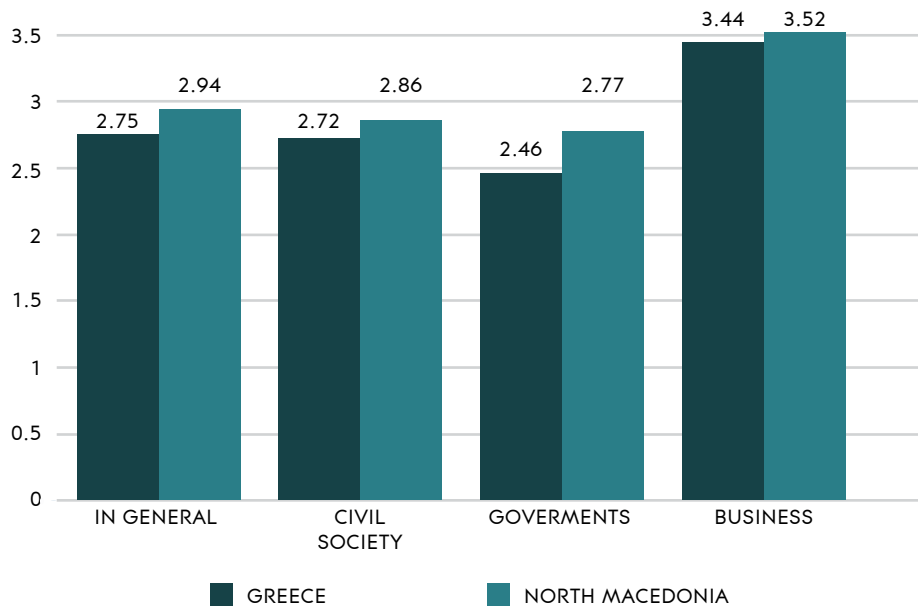


DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THERE IS COOPERATION BETWEEN PEOPLE FROM NORTH MACEDONIA AND GREECE?

One of the more important questions we have asked the respondents is their opinion if there is a cooperation between both countries. First and foremost, we asked the respondents to give us their opinion if they believe that there is already cooperation between the two countries. The Prespa agreement was an important step in normalizing the relationships between the two countries, and a positive step forward in terms of institutional cooperation. This might have reflected in the numbers in the above-cited table. However, as we do not have any data before the signature of the Prespa agreement, it is hard to conclude if that played any role.

**In terms of the numbers from our respondents, it's clear that in both countries we have a high belief that there is already some form of cooperation between the two countries. Although from the Greek side of respondents we have a smaller percentage in that segment, other factors such as media coverage can influence this.** For instance, media in North Macedonia tends to follow closely what is being implemented from the Prespa agreement and have in-depth coverage from the meetings between politicians from both countries. However, we cannot measure the reporting and should be done in further researches into the topic of cooperation between both countries.

However, it is encouraging to see that young respondents from both countries already believe that there is some form of cooperation between the two countries, on which both countries can further build upon.



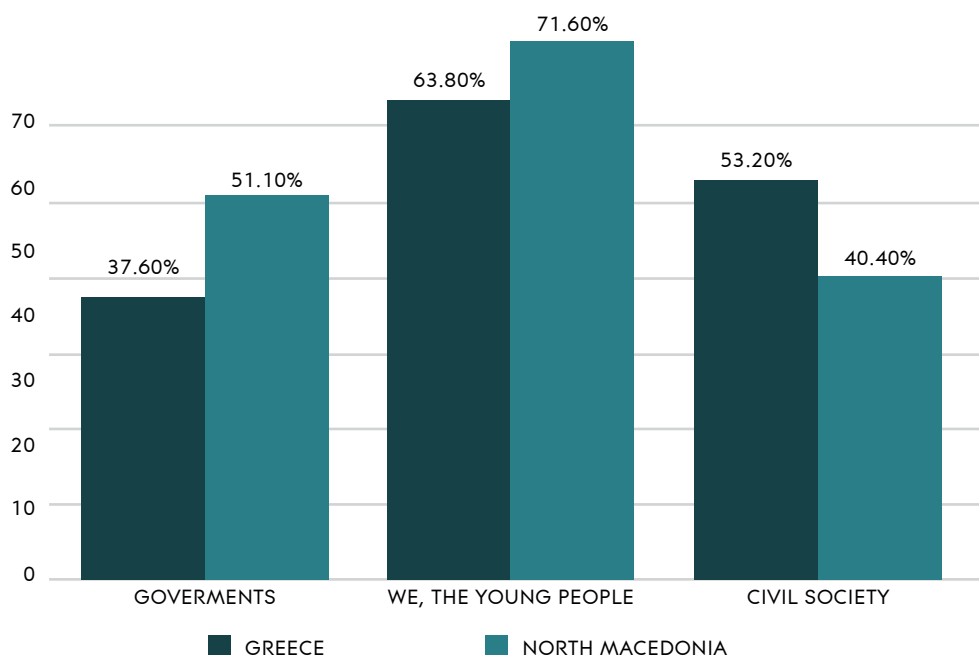
ON A SCALE FROM 1 TO 5,  
HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE FOLLOWING SECTORS  
IN TERMS OF COOPERATION

Furthermore, we asked the respondents about their assessment on a scale from 1 to 5 about different sectors and how they perceive the cooperation. This can be seen in the table above. The numbers are the means of the 219 answers from both countries. **The general perception is that the general cooperation is below the middle number 3 in almost all cases. Respondents from North Macedonia have a slightly higher rate of assessment of the cooperation between the two countries, yet it is still below the middle number on the scale.** Again, some factors for the rates from the Greek respondents could be the media coverage of the topic or other factors that we cannot foresee. For instance, the media coverage of the North Macedonia government in terms of cooperation has been a high topic in media.

On other hand, only the cooperation in terms of business has been rated above the middle rate number. This indicates that respondents from both countries are well informed that the business aspect of cooperation is up and going, even before the normalization of the relationship of both countries.

All in all, we can conclude that the respondents rate the cooperation in certain sectors lower than others. This could mean that there is a need for a more open approach in terms of transparency and sharing information about certain types of initiatives for cooperation.

The focus groups further build upon that conclusion, since almost all of the interviewed politicians or former civil servants have reported some type of cooperation. **This means that behind the scenes there is already some form of cooperation, whether that is on topics of culture or specific cross-border projects. However, this has not yet reached the publics' eyes, although all of them can be counted as pioneers in terms of creating mechanisms for cooperation.**



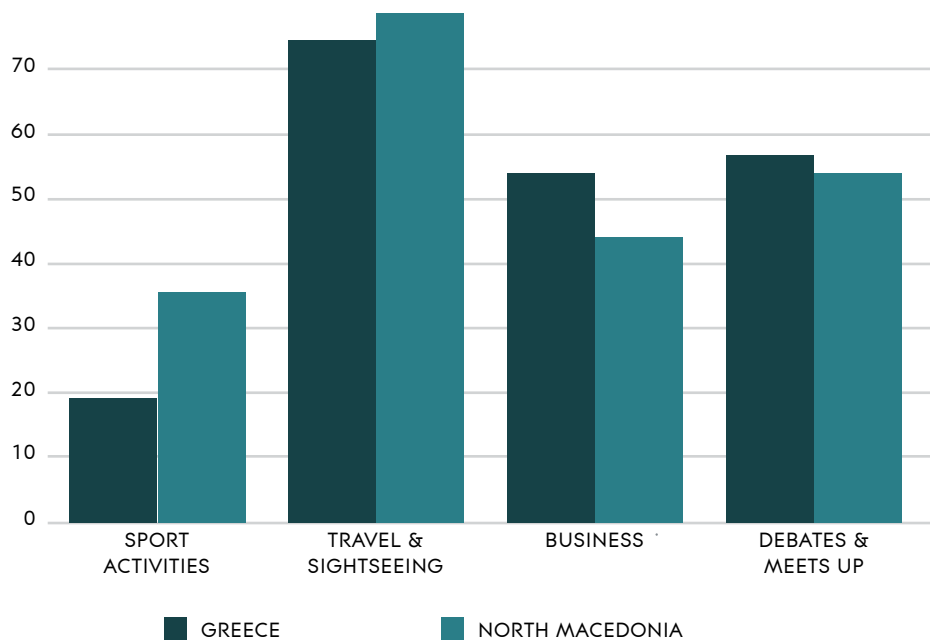
### WHO HAS THE MOST RESPONSIBILITIES TO CREATE BETTER MECHANISMS FOR COOPERATION

We also wanted to get the opinion from our youth respondents on their views on who has the most responsibilities to create better mechanisms for cooperation. As seen in the above table, **we can conclude that youth themselves feel the most responsible to create better mechanisms.** This also goes in line with the project of the creation of Bilateral Youth Cooperation Offices taking the bottom-up approach in terms of the creation of such offices. **However, there are two major differences in views between the respondents from both countries. On the one hand, the respondents from North Macedonia believe that the governments should take more responsibilities. On the other hand, only 38% of Greek respondents believe that this should be the case.** These figures might also be an indicator in the trust towards governmental institutions, or simply an anomaly of the governmental systems themselves in terms of how they function. For instance, both countries have different political traditions and ways of work, which might influence one side to favor governments, but to the other to have an opposite view.

Lastly, civil society as an important driver of change in both countries has been differently viewed by the respondents. **More than half of the Greek respondents have answered more positively that it is the responsibility of civil society, and on the other hand, respondents from North Macedonia have answered that it's the least responsible factor for the creation of mechanisms for cooperation.** Again, a factor here could play the different traditions in terms of organizing in both countries.

All in all, this segment shows that there is a possibility to work closely with young people themselves and build mechanisms for cooperation from the bottom-up approach. Yet, all of the three sectors are important to have a clear view and plan in the next steps for the creation of mechanisms for cooperation between the two countries.





### IN WHAT TYPE OF ACTIVITIES WOULD YOU LIKE TO PARTICIPATE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THE OTHER COUNTRY

In the end, we also asked respondents for their views on what they would like to participate in. The table above is important in the sense of future activities that governments, youth organizations, or young people themselves can see what topics are the most interesting for bringing young people from both countries closer together.

All in all, **we can conclude that sports activities are the least favorite activities in which youth would participate. Traveling and sightseeing are a positive factor and are the most interesting for the youth respondents from our data set.** Furthermore, business seems to be a welcomed topic and sector for more than half of the Greek respondents. Interestingly, debates and meetups such as study visits are also an activity in which half of the respondents would like to participate in.

Having this in mind, the future steps for cooperation between young people should be built around this, especially giving youth from both countries the chance to jointly see and travel around both countries.

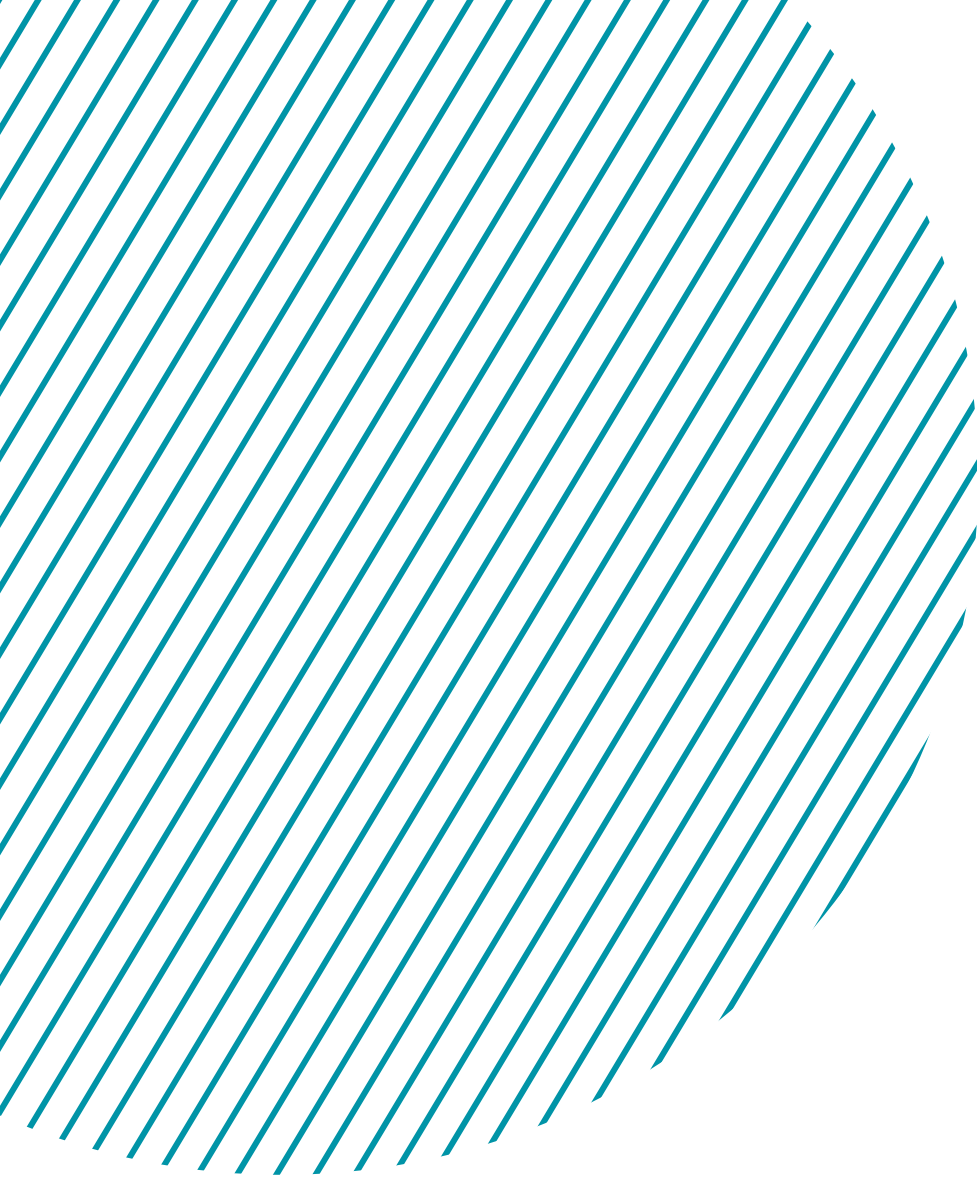
# CONCLUSION

Although our gathering of data was not based on a representative sample from both countries, we think that the figures and stories acquired through our approach shows a very favourable atmosphere among youth for cooperation. Building on this, both governments and countries should invest their political leverage to create a direct mechanism for youth activities and educational exchange between the two countries.

On the one hand, this will enable future generations to limit the nationalistic attitudes that were once and are still popular in both countries. On the other hand, it will enable young people to break the possible stereotypes.

What we can conclude and what one of our participants in the focus group defined very well is that "After the Prespa agreement we have better communication. It's an opportunity to strength our long-term relations and to strengthen the youth communication and relations".

Well, now it is up to both countries, their governments, civil society, and youth to build further on this and to strengthen the relations between the two societies.



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COOPERATION  
FOR A  
COMMON FUTURE