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CITIZENSHIP AND LIFELONG LEARNING MONITOR 2021

NORTH MACEDONIA

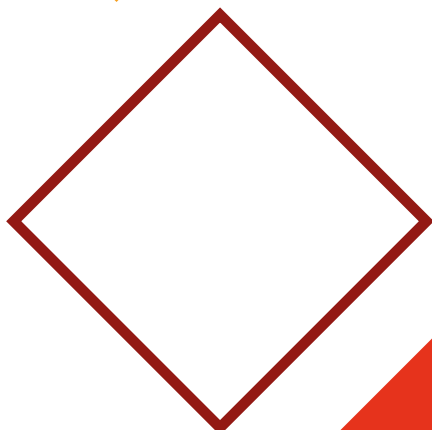
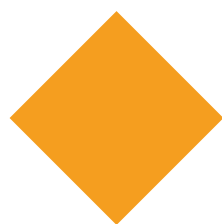




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ABSTRACT

The following report is one of eleven national case studies building up the sixth edition of the SOLIDAR Foundation's annual Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor. The North Macedonian case study looks into the implementation of Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the country, considering the importance of these two topics in equipping learners with the needed competences to fight against the climate crisis. The report also assesses the possibility of learners to exert the civic and green competences that they have in the context of a shrinking civic space in North Macedonian. The situation regarding EES has worsened in the past years, with a commitment to the topic at declarative level, but with inconsistent implementation and lack of coordination across governmental initiatives and policies that could refer to the topic. At the same time, adult education experiences exceptionally low

participation rates, which stunt the capacity to ensure that all North Macedonian citizens have the needed green competences. Informal and non-formal education providers have strived to provide more avenues for developing green competences but they have been facing a restrictive civic space that has reduced much of the funding for CSOs, including for those working on this topic. The lack of inclusion of CSOs in policymaking and lawmaking is another challenge which effectively leaves a large part of informal and non-formal education providers outside of the decision-making around education, preventing the capacity of such providers, accustomed to delivering EES in innovative ways, incapable to advocate for a change of paradigm at educational level. The report considers these challenges, discussing them in-depth, and then concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at North Macedonian public authorities for addressing the situation.



INTRODUCTION

The following report represents one of eleven national case studies feeding into the sixth edition of the SOLIDAR Foundation's annual Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor. The purpose of this case study is to analyse and investigate the changes undertaken in the fields of citizenship education and lifelong learning policies in North Macedonia and their relationship with the state of the civic space in the country. The North Macedonian report is focused on two main topics: education for environmental sustainability in the frame of Global Citizenship Education, and the shrinking civic space and the ways civil society organisations (CSOs) counter this nationally and through cross-border solidarity. The report will start with an assessment of the inclusion of EES and ESD in formal education, evaluating the most central strategies for education

developed in the past years in North Macedonia. It then considers the way in which EES finds its way in adult education, and presents the work that the informal and non-formal education providers have been doing on EES. After assessing this situation, the analysis will focus on the shrinking of the civic space in North Macedonia, considering how this process has been impacting the capacity of many informal and non-formal education providers, including SOLIDAR Foundation members, to deliver the type of learning needed for the EES but also it has impacted people's capacities to exert their civic and green competences in an open and transparent environment. The Monitor will study, in conjunction, the aspects of EES and civic space and provide recommendations to the North Macedonian public authorities on the related arising challenges.

EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

EES IN FORMAL EDUCATION

The topic of EES takes various forms in North Macedonia, with concepts such as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), climate change education, climate education, environmental education, or even EES being mentioned across various education stakeholders. References to this topic have started to multiply as of 2009 when the government had launched the implementation of the programme Integration of Environmental Education in the Macedonian Education System, which depended on financing from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation¹. The most recent policy action linked with this long-term process was launched at the end of 2020, when a 3-year long programme for environmental education and climate action for children was launched. This new programme, which is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and is developed in partnership with UNICEF, is aimed at the pre-primary, primary and secondary levels of education. The programme prioritises the development of competences such as collaboration, critical thinking, making responsible choices for a sustainable world. It will raise awareness on climate change, explaining the aspects linked to the environmental crisis and its manifestations, but at the same time it envisions resources for the education professionals to develop their competences on delivering EES in the classroom through professional development opportunities and through peer learning activities². The programme is welcomed considering

that the impetus for the inclusion of EES in education has been on a descending trajectory in the recent years. **The reliance on foreign funding for the development of this programme highlights this issue, as the topic is not a priority for investment coming from the side of the North Macedonian government. This has been the case since the initial process of inclusion of EES in mainstream education, which also started with reliance on funding from another European country.**

Looking into the country's [Education Strategy and associated Action Plan](#), which are valid until 2025, one can see a glaring omission of sustainability related topics from education. **The green dimension associated to ESD or EES is completely ignored**, with a small reference to the fact that Environmental Education is made available as an Optional Course³. Some references are made to the relevancy of subject programmes to the local context⁴, which can be considered a reference to project-based learning and to linking the global and local spaces – a fixture of global citizenship education – but overall, the green transition is completely overlooked by the most central strategic policy document for the education sector in North Macedonia. At the same time, as a non-annex I party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the North Macedonian government, through the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning, has submitted the [Enhanced Nationally Determined Contribution](#).

1 Jovanovka, Mila (2020). *Prevalence of Climate Change Education in the Nine-Year-Elementary Education in the Republic of North Macedonia*. GoGreen and Heinrich Böll Stiftung Sarajaevo. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JrEYzVvGc2FpZ-J6iGcviGqlwFxBF7N92/view>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

2 UNICEF North Macedonia (2020). *New environmental education programme puts youth at the forefront of climate action*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/press-releases/new-environmental-education-programme-puts-youth-forefront-climate-action>. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

3 The Ministry of Education and Science of North Macedonia (2018). *Education Strategy for 2018-2025 and Action Plan*. Available at: <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/macedonia-education-strategy-for-2018-2025-and-action-plan-strategija-za-obrazovanie-eng-web-1.pdf>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022. P.31.

4 Ibid. Pp.22-23.

This, however, fails to reference the needed synergies with the education sector in order to meet the Paris Agreement goals. Education is mentioned only twice, once in relation to the mis-alliance with labour market needs and once in relation to raising awareness about climate change⁵. The first reference points towards a narrow perspective of education that does not serve to holistically develop learners for a society in which the green transition must go beyond the workplace, while the second one transforms learners into passive vessels in which knowledge is stored, rather than in active co-creators for the purpose of developing their competences and empowering them to fight climate challenge.

SOLIDAR Foundation member, [Community Development Institute \(CDI\)](#), highlights that elements of EES, especially linked to raising awareness on the human-made climate crisis or about the economic aspect of renewable energy, are part of the curricula for various subjects in formal education. However, this cross-curricular approach is not brought into practice considering the **lack of attention and support provided to the type of coordination needed for cross-curricular topics in the Education Strategy**. Moreover, the presence of an optional topic on this theme is also detracting from the possibility to implement the topic cross-curricularly in an effective manner, and in a way that ensures that all learners across North Macedonia have access to this type of education. It is, however, **encouraging to see that the newly adopted concept for primary education stresses inclusiveness, gender sensitivity/equality and interculturalism**⁶. The Ministry of Education adopted this



concept in March 2021 and it does provide a cross-curricular approach⁷ that is consistent with GCE, considering its new thematic focuses that were mentioned above, providing grounds for developing the building blocks needed to implement EES, which requires a similar approach. As this concept started to be implemented in the school year 2021/2022⁸ it is unfeasible to evaluate its implementation for the moment.

These developments depend on the support provided to the education professionals. For the moment, North Macedonia has not yet met the European Commission recommendations from 2020 on initial teacher training and continuous professional development, or on the assessment process for teachers⁹. This needs to be further prioritized as without an encouraging environment for the training of educational professionals, it is difficult to ensure that the teaching profession will have the needed competences to implement EES and ESD.

5 Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of North Macedonia (2021). *Enhanced Nationally Determined Contribution – Submission by the Republic of North Macedonia*. Available at : [https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/ndcstaging/PublishedDocuments/The%20Republic%20of%20North%20Macedonia%20First/Macedonian%20enhanced%20NDC%20\(002\).pdf](https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/ndcstaging/PublishedDocuments/The%20Republic%20of%20North%20Macedonia%20First/Macedonian%20enhanced%20NDC%20(002).pdf). Last accessed: 1 March 2022.

6 European Commission (2021). *North Macedonia 2021 Report*. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. P.88. Available at : https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021_en. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

7 Ibid.

8 Eurydice (2022). *National Reforms in School Education: the Republic of North Macedonia*. Available at : https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-reforms-school-education-42_en#:~:text=In%20September%202020%2C%20the%20Assembly,of%20the%20Covid%2D19%20pandemic. Last accessed: 28 February 2022.

9 European Commission (2021). *North Macedonia 2021 Report*. Pp.86-87.

EES IN NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION

The importance of continuing education outside of the formal sector cannot be stressed enough when discussing EES, as the topic needs to be part of a lifelong and lifewide learning approach in order to make sure that learners are equipped to deal with the all-encompassing environmental crisis. The actions needed to correct the course on which currently the planet finds itself imply a necessity to always reflect on EES and include it in the way learners live their lives, without leaving it behind once formal education concludes. Therefore, adult learning becomes key to ensuring that various generations of people can contribute to combatting the crisis. The importance of upscaling adult learning is even greater in North Macedonia, considering that 28.4% of the adults have not even completed upper secondary education. It does have to be highlighted that the educational attainment rate has increased considerably in the last few years, but given the low initial baseline, more work is needed in North Macedonia to ensure that all learners develop the needed competences to actively participate in the 21st century society, especially the capacity of learning to learn and being open to lifelong learning¹⁰. This increasing attainment is overshadowed by a participation rate of adults in education of less than 3% in 2019, in the four weeks prior to the implementation of the EU labour force survey. The figure becomes even more damning when considering that the adults most in need of further learning, those with low levels of qualifications, had a rate of participation of below 1% in 2019¹¹. In addition, the new draft Law on Adult Education is yet to be adopted¹², revealing

another educational process that is currently in limbo even if it requires urgent action.

With a narrowed focus on EES at formal education level and with so low engagement linked to further education, it becomes apparent **that the development of green competences for the broader North Macedonian population is not moving at the pace required**. This is a serious concern given that all generations need to be adapted for the green transition, considering the urgency brought forward by the climate emergency. This concern is further enhanced by the issue of funding in education, with only 3.3% of the GDP being allocated to this sector in 2020¹³. With funding decreasing from previous levels¹⁴ and being significantly below the EU average¹⁵, lack of investment in education makes it difficult to ensure a reform that would see EES and ESD better integrated. At the same time, it can create issues of accessibility to education, as **funding is required to ensure equity in education, which in turns puts significant pressure on the shoulders of SOLIDAR Foundation members and other CSOs striving to close gaps in education via non-formal and informal means**. SOLIDAR Foundation member, [CDI](#), has been pushing for knowledge sharing and development of practical competences linked to agriculture and sustainable development. This approach has a clear thematic focus, but it is part of the way [CDI](#) is leading actions on EES by means of developing the competences of workers in specific sector, but always in relation to a Just Transition¹⁶, that is based on EES. More about their work on this, and specifically in relation to their participation [Agro Food Co-operative Macedonia](#), can be found below.

10 Eurydice (2021). *Adult Education and Training in Europe: Building inclusive pathways to skills and qualifications*. Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg. P.30. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/node/11855_en. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

11 Ibid. P.37.

12 European Commission (2021). *North Macedonia 2021 Report*. P.87.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 European Commission (2021). *Education and Training Monitor 2021*. Available at : <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2021/en/chapters/chapter3.html#ch3-1>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

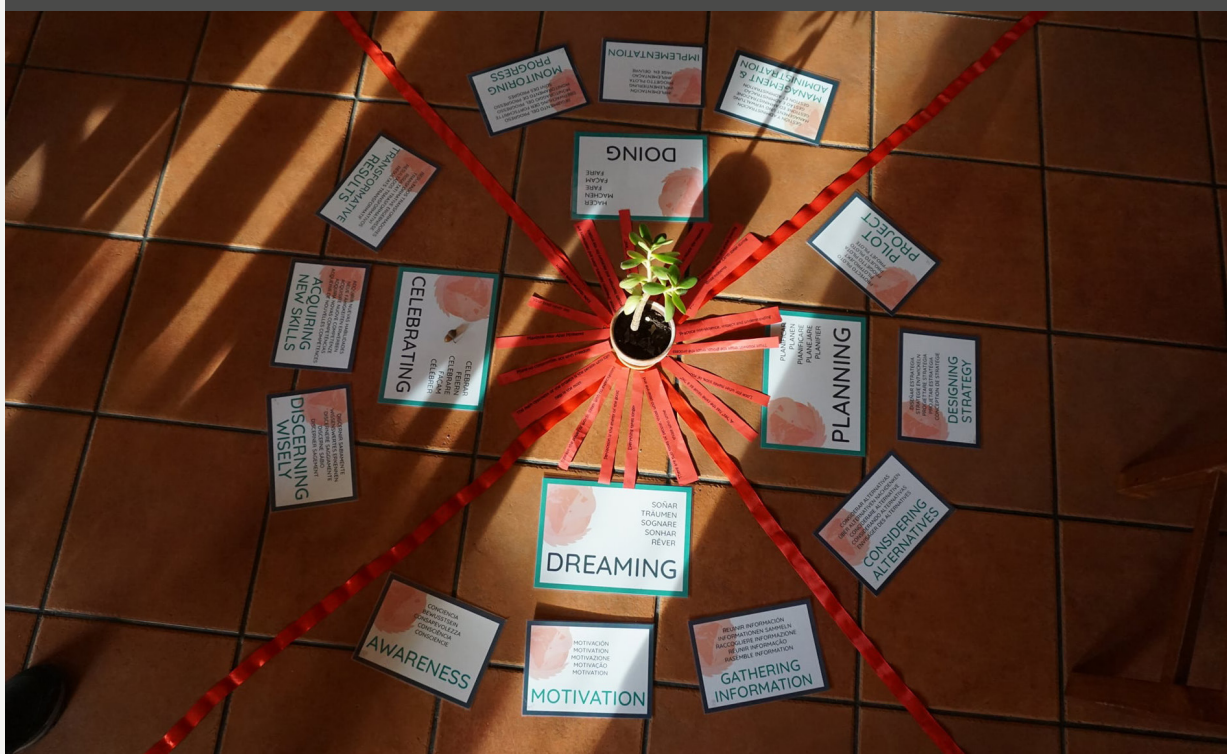
16 International Trade Union Confederation (2009). *What's Just Transition?*. Available at: <https://www.ituc-csi.org/what-s-just-transition>. Last accessed: 23 February 2022.

CASE STUDY

SOLIDAR Foundation member, **CDI**, is part of the [Agro Food Cooperative Macedonia](#) initiative which was launched in 2018. This initiative is focused on increasing the quality and scope of food production by strengthening agricultural actors in North Macedonia. However, this is being done while keeping in mind the importance of sustainability in agriculture, and while also broadening up its scope to feature adjacent topics to agriculture, such as agrotourism. The goal of the project is to use this sustainable approach to ensure that all have equal access to food at times when such resources are threatened by the climate emergency. As a cooperative, this project is reuniting agricultural holdings as full or associate members, who are committed to show solidarity towards their fellows. Beyond the sustainability element, therefore, the cooperative is building up feelings

of support and mutual aiding which are consistent with the need for collaboration and empathy in fighting the climate crisis, but more at large any of the 21st century global challenges.

A spin-off of **CDI**'s participation in the Cooperative is their most recent participation in the Erasmus+ funded project, [Agro-TUR-MK 2.0](#), which commenced in 2019. The focus of the project is ensuring the sustainable development of rural regions, and it does so by relying on agrotourism as a way of transforming rural areas into references of culture and traditions without sacrificing environmental awareness. This has also been achieved via trainings that were provided by the project partners, with the most recent example being one delivered in Spain, which documentary evidence of the training being available [here](#).



Source: Agro Food Cooperative Macedonia (Zadruga)

The work of CSOs on education becomes essential once seeing the structural issues related to the implementation of EES in education. At the same time, as North Macedonia is lagging behind in meeting the broader climate requirements from the EU, the CSOs are the ones taking an active role to campaign for environmental issues. SOLIDAR Foundation member, [CDI](#), has been part of the campaign on the protection of the Shara mountain. Below you can see more on how the campaign developed, but this serves as another approach through which the CSOs are raising awareness on environmental issues, mobilise the citizens and engage in EES by means of this approach. Informal and non-formal education providers can offer a more practical type of learning, that is more innovative in relation to EES. This, however, is not always made easily accessible to learners, as reports are

showing that it is possible to link volunteering and internships in CSOs to formal education in North Macedonia, but that the amount of instances in which this happens is very low. For this purpose, CSOs need further support and more avenues for cooperation with the formal education sector in order to provide a coordinated response against the climate crisis and develop the green competences needed for the 21st century society. There is a missed opportunity in terms of ensuring that the learning is provided in a lifelong and lifewide manner, that connects all aspects of one's life with the ubiquitous nature of climate aspects in people's lives. The following section will highlight some other ways in which this coordination on EES is made almost possible, as the Monitor will commence looking into aspects of shrinking civic space in North Macedonia.

CASE STUDY

SOLIDAR Foundation member, [CDI](#), has joined the [Friends of Shara](#) campaign which was founded by the Center for Education and Development, the Ljuboten Mountaineering Club, the Macedonian Ecological Society and the Civic Integration Initiative and launched in 2021. The campaign is funded by [GIZ](#) and the [South Eastern Europe Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group](#), and is reunited on this digital platform. The campaign focused on declaring the Shara Mountain a national park, to prevent the exploitation of its resources and foster its biodiversity.

The campaign has combined a travelling cinema with thematic forums to discuss with the population in the rural areas next to the mountain, raising awareness on the issue of the status of the mountain. The campaign commissioned research and gave voice to various experts that discussed about the environmental danger of excessively exploiting the mountain's resources, and the great loss it would be to North

Macedonia to impact this ecosystem. A vast majority of the inhabitants in the areas next to the mountain are in favour of proclaiming it a national park, with 75% supporting this initiative based on [surveys](#) ran by the leading organisations of this campaign. However, previous research from 2016 and 2021 shows an overwhelming support of the general North Macedonian population to proclaim the mountain a national park.

Such initiatives are essential for promoting a mindset through which people learn to live while maintaining environmental sustainability, focusing on the ecological potential of their surroundings rather than abusing of their surroundings for their own material benefit. The co-existence with nature that is promoted by this campaign and that is instilled in the people reached by the campaign is exactly the type of education needed to all populations across Europe to change the paradigm on the relationship between humans and environment.



SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

As in most European countries, freedom of assembly was seriously stunted during the pandemic, with restrictive measures preventing gatherings reuniting more than five people over the period of Spring 2020¹⁷. A more serious development was the reduction of funding for CSOs during the pandemic, which the previous edition of the Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor mentioned¹⁸. The reduction happened swiftly, with no consultation of the beneficiaries of this funding¹⁹. This came at a moment when funding for CSOs was in any case insufficient, mostly short-term and project-based, but also in the middle of a pandemic that was preventing CSOs to lead their work normally²⁰. A development since the release of our previous Monitor was that due to significant protests from the CSOs, the funding was re-allocated. However, the re-allocation occurred in a dubious manner, with a very short deadline to apply for the funding, with an evaluation process of the applications for said funding that lasted for only two days even if the government received 549 applications and with issues regarding the compositions of evaluation committees and the assessments they provided²¹. Beyond this, the pandemic was marked by a failure to provide adequate public information on the funding procedures and funded projects from the

side of the majority of state institutions²².

During the pandemic, the government has also taken measures to restrict freedom, making use of COVID-19 related restrictions in this sense. Reporting in the vicinity of health facilities was not permitted, while the free movement of the press during the hours in which this was restricted due to curfews was dependent on obtaining passes by registering in two different registrars, adding an administrative burden for reporters. After opposition from the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, the permits were granted to all media workers, independent of registrations that would basically create an alternative database of journalists for the usage of the governmental authorities²³. The freedom of expression is seriously affected in North Macedonia as attacks directed at journalists or CSOs striving for transparency have been occurring prior to the pandemic and did not stop when COVID-19 appeared. The example reported by CIVICUS regarding the hate speech campaign directed at the Skopje-based CSO, Metamorphosis Foundation, supports this, while also the threats of defamation lawsuits aimed at various journalists by public authorities officials embroiled in corruption scandals that were revealed by these journalists²⁴. North Macedonia continues to rank very low on the World Press Freedom Index even if certain

17 CIVICUS (2020). *Funding Cuts and No Economic Assistance for CSOs during COVID-19*. Available at : <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2020/06/15/funding-cuts-and-no-economic-assistance-csos-during-covid-19/>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

18 Frank, Andrei (2021). *Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020: North Macedonia National Report*. SOLIDAR Foundation. Available at : https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/001/315/original/CLLL_Monitor2020_National_report_North_Macedonia.pdf?1617694983. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

19 CIVICUS (2020). *Funding Cuts and No Economic Assistance for CSOs during COVID-19*.; The amount referred to here is 525.000 EUR.

20 Kotevska, Biljana (2021). *Legal environment and space of civil society organisations in supporting fundamental rights- North Macedonia*. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. Available at : https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/franet_north_macedonia_civic_space_2021.pdf. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

21 Bosilkova-Antovska, Anja (2021). *Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development - Regional Report: Western Balkans 2020*. Balkan Civil Society Development Network. Pp.34-35. Available at : https://www.balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/94-5-Regional-Monitoring-Matrix-Report-2020_FINAL.pdf. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.

22 Ibid.

23 Kotevska, Biljana (2021). *Legal environment and space of civil society organisations in supporting fundamental rights- North Macedonia*. P.5.

24 CIVICUS (2021). *Skopje Court Fails to Protect Journalists as They Continue to Come Under Attack*. Available at : <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/01/13/skopje-court-fails-protect-journalists-they-continue-come-under-attack/>. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

improvements have been noticed²⁵. Without the capacity to report transparently on abuses of power, the corruption is entrenching itself in ways that are then preventing the proper operation of civil society.



SPOTLIGHT: EXPEDITED LEGISLATIVE PROCEDURES AND THE LACK OF STRUCTURE OF CSOS

A significant concern for CSOs in North Macedonia is linked with the possibility to be consulted on policy and lawmaking. Representatives of SOLIDAR Foundation member, [CDI](#), voice their concerns in relation to the expedited

process of decision-making in North Macedonia which bypasses [CDI](#) as well as other CSOs on numerous occasions, but also with the fact that the agenda of the decision-makers rarely prioritises topics which the CSOs want to see action on, and that the voice of CSOs is many times ignored. The expedited and urgent legislative procedures used by the Parliament have been the norm over the period 2015-2019, with numbers not yet available for 2020²⁶. This allows for little possibilities for discussion and amendments. This has also impacted the measures taken during the pandemic, for which economic chambers were consulted but for which CSOs were left out, due to this culture of expedited decision-making. Only 34.3% of the drafted laws in North Macedonia found their way on the online platform for public consultations, each abiding by the minimum timeframe for responses allocated, 20 days. COVID-19 laws were some of the drafted laws that never reached the online platform. Only 37.5% of CSOs in North Macedonia reported being consulted in the past year by policymakers or lawmakers. This number decreased as of last year, as well as the number of CSOs reporting to being involved sufficiently in advance in the policymaking and lawmaking processes²⁷. The expedited procedure is, as can be seen from the lines above, complemented by this culture of avoiding to transparently published decision-making actions and of avoiding to publish on-going processes on channels created specifically for the civil society and citizens to be able to more actively participate in the way their country is being steered.

This situation might be exacerbated by the fact that in 2020 the strategy for development and cooperation with civil society has ended, while the development of a new strategy has not started yet²⁸. This leaves CSOs in limbo and unsure of the position of the public authorities.



25 CIVICUS (2021). *Protests on Anniversary of "Bloody Thursday"; Concerning Court Ruling for Journalism Profession*. Available at : <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/05/31/protests-anniversary-bloody-thursday-concerning-court-ruling-journalism-profession/>. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

26 Kotevska, Biljana (2021). *Legal environment and space of civil society organisations in supporting fundamental rights- North Macedonia*. P.3.

27 Bosilkova-Antovska, Anja (2021). *Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development - Regional Report: Western Balkans 2020*. Pp.48-49.

28 Ibid. P.44.

This situation is made even more worrisome by the electoral and political volatility existent in North Macedonia as the October 2021 local elections have seen a massive shift with the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) winning fewer than 20 municipalities, compared to their 57 wins in the previous election, while the right-wing party, VMRO-DPMNE winning 80 compared to their 5 victories in the previous election. This has also prompted the SDSM Prime Minister of North Macedonia to announce his resignation, which, as of the writing of this report, was still pending as it required the approval of the Parliament²⁹. As the political actors in power are changing significantly from election to election and as the country is in the process of having a new government as well, this can raise challenges for CSOs from the perspective of continuity and long-term planning, especially in the absence of a decision to formalize the process of cooperation that would clearly set the boundaries and frames of the relationship between the public authorities and CSOs.

Making the matters worse is the fact that a large part of the funding for CSOs is foreign funding, revealing yet again the fact that the North Macedonian government is not prioritizing investment into such organisations. SOLIDAR Foundation member, [CDI](#), confirms this reliance on foreign funding, highlighting the risks associated with such an unpredictable and ad-hoc model of funding for organisations that require significantly more stability for the type of work that they do. Moreover, the VAT exemption procedures for foreign funding have been made overly complicated due to the long and burdensome project registration procedures at the Secretariat for European Affairs³⁰. Given the already absent national funding, the complications attached to foreign funding is making it possible only for larger and more

established CSOs to continue their activities, while smaller such organisations would experience too high demands to remain operational.

CIVIL SOCIETY STRIKES BACK

The response of the civil society during these trying times has made strides in forcing the North Macedonian authorities to better support CSOs. The aforementioned example of the reversal of funding cuts in the aftermath of the pandemic is just one example where the civil society has been partially successful in thwarting restrictions to the civic space. The word partial is key as above it was detailed how that funding was returned, which was far from the transparent way in which it was initially provided. Beyond this, the CIVICUS Monitor has reported a return to a better situation in terms of freedom of assembly, detailing a number of protests that took place over 2021, revealing healthy engagement from the civil society. Several of these protests were aimed at various infrastructural developments that would have damaged the environment, at online harassment, at multiple sex scandals, at wrongful deaths related to COVID-19, but also at the COVID-19 restrictions in general³¹.

At the same time, **CSOs have been promoting a culture of cross-border solidarity, with SOLIDAR Foundation member, [CDI](#), being a clear example of this mindset considering its participation in multiple international networks and initiatives.** [CDI](#) is a member in the following networks or initiatives, amongst others: [European Civic Forum](#), [SAMARITAN International](#), [European Network Against Racism](#), [IRIS Network](#), the [Pact for Skills](#), [European Association Working for Careers](#). Through this work, they engaged in multiple ways to support disadvantaged learners,

29 Brezar, Aleksandar (2021). *North Macedonia's prime minister resigns over disappointing local election results*. Euronews. Available at : <https://www.euronews.com/2021/11/01/north-macedonia-s-prime-minister-resigns-after-local-election-results>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

30 Bosilkova-Antovska, Anja (2021). *Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development - Regional Report: Western Balkans 2020*. Pp.27-28.

31 CIVICUS (2021). *Online Harassment via Telegram Sparks Protest*. Available at : <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/03/11/online-harassment-telegram-sparks-protest/>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

and especially people with disabilities, to have access to education during the pandemic. To ensure a vibrant civil society, beyond directly fighting for the maintenance of the civic space, beyond joining forces at international level, it is important to see how solidarity is provided to those most vulnerable in society. SOLIDAR Foundation member, [CDI](#), prides itself also for the work done on the ground in this regard, with its representatives explaining that when limitations either linked to the impact of the shrinking

civic space, or to funding, or to the COVID-19 pandemic appear, it is important to look at how CSOs continue to support their beneficiaries. By innovating and remaining relevant in this way, [CDI](#) is ensuring that those most underprivileged can still access the civic space. You can find in the case study below one type of example through which CDI performs this work, but there are numerous other activities performed by them in various fields linked to social inclusion.



CASE STUDY

SOLIDAR Foundation member, [CDI](#), is part of the Erasmus+ funded project [Digital Skills for an Ageing Europe \(DISK\)](#) which is coordinated by the French NGO e-Seniors and was launched in 2020. Other project partners include NGOs from Greece, Spain, Belgium and Italy. The project aims to tackle loneliness, isolation and social exclusion that are impacting older people. In doing so, it aims to promote active ageing, encouraging ageing people to take up new technologies to combat the health risks caused by the aforementioned challenges. A main output of the project is an online platform meant to help elderly people improve their memory and learning skills, while supporting them in getting accustomed to performing day-to-day tasks online.

Beyond the clear health benefits of the project, it is aimed at connected the elderly people with the way in which the

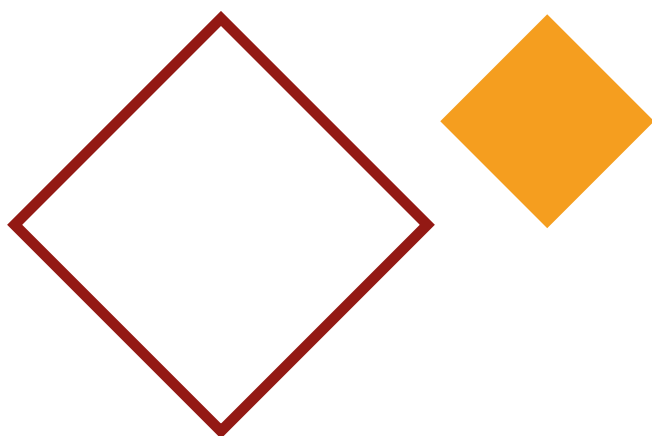
civil society operates these days, via many online tools. This allows for the inclusion of a disadvantaged group in society, empowering them to continue having their say and participating into how the society is developing. The project will conclude with training guides for the elderly but also with policy recommendations on how to boost the participation of this section of the population in the 21st century day-to-day life.



CONCLUSION

This report has looked at the situation in North Macedonia regarding the development of EES and civic competences associated with EES. At the same time, it looked into the restrictions of the civic space, especially in light of the pandemic, considering how challenges to the civil society would impact the informal and non-formal education providers that have been striving to close the gaps in terms of provision of EES, given the shortcomings of the formal education sector. EES and ESD have been mainstreamed across the education strategies of North Macedonia as of 2009, however, in the recent years, just as the momentum for the green transition has been picking up across Europe, the topics have been more obscured across the newly released policy initiatives in the field of education. At the same time, the practical implementation of the topic in formal education remains inconsistent, with insufficient support provided to education professionals, with a cross-curricular implementation that is unclear and also watered-down by the provision of the environmental education optional topic, and with insufficient focus on adult learning linked to EES. The green transition and the climate crisis are, therefore, inadequately addressed by the North Macedonian education system, while the possibility of informal and non-formal

education providers to close the gaps on this topic is stunted by an increasingly restrictive civic space. More specifically, the funding allocated to CSOs is limited, with these organisations mostly relying on foreign investment which, in turn, is linked with overly complicated procedures for CSOs to obtain VAT exemptions for this type of investment. The public authorities in North Macedonia have been also excluding CSOs from policymaking and lawmaking given the expedited approach used by the elected officials and the public authorities, which, in turn, limits the capacity of CSOs to influence the education decision-making, especially in light of the shortcomings linked to EES, ESD and GCE. The pandemic has made it even more complicated for CSOs to lead their work considering curtailment of further rights but also simply the impact of the restrictions on the proper operations of CSOs. In this dire context, it has been inspiring to see how specific informal and non-formal education providers, including SOLIDAR Foundation members, have found avenues to continue their advocacy work, to push against governmental restrictions that go beyond the protection of the health of the North Macedonian people and to provide innovative ways of teaching EES to the broader North Macedonian society.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Reintegrate EES in the governmental initiatives on formal education
- ◆ Ensure a better provision of the topic in a cross-curricular manner, removing the optional aspect to the topic
- ◆ Provide more opportunities for trainings and more favourable conditions for training for the teaching profession to engage in continuous professional development on teaching EES in the classroom
- ◆ Develop more avenues for collaboration among formal, informal and non-formal education providers to ensure that EES and civic competences can be taught in a lifelong and lifewide learning manner
- ◆ Boost the participation of adults in learning, especially of those low skilled ones
- ◆ Push for the inclusion of EES in forms of adult learning such as work-based training, VET, other types of formation courses, non-formal and informal learning
- ◆ Ensure a more systematic and long-term funding for CSOs
- ◆ Simplify the registration procedures to the Secretariat for European Affairs, ensuring that CSOs have a more favourable climate to access funding
- ◆ Revert to more deliberative processes on decision-making, ensuring that CSOs can be consulted on decision-making matters linked to their topics of action, but, more broadly, ensuring the participation of all stakeholders in the consultative process.

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