

RURAL YOUTH

Key findings from the qualitative
and quantitative research

“ The voice of the young people is not heard here. You may have a university degree, but if you aren’t a member of a political party, you are nothing. ”
Male, 21, Kosturino

Rural Youth – Definition and Size

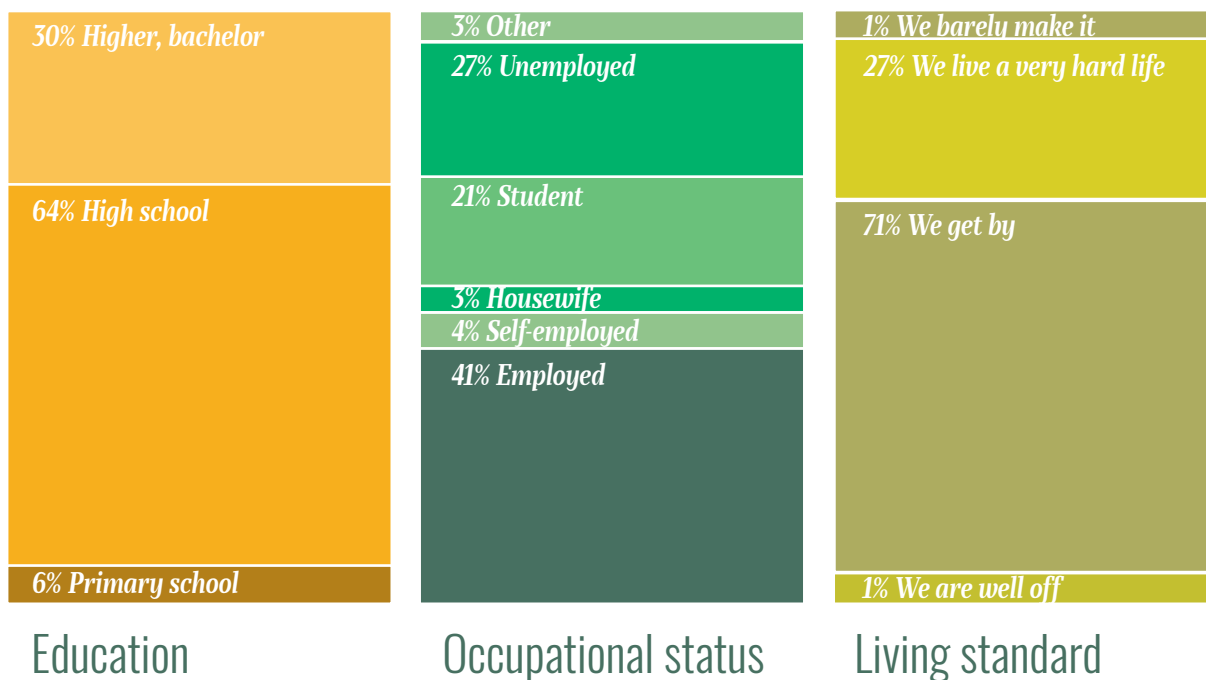
For the purposes of this study, rural youth is defined as young people aged 18 to 29 years living in rural settlements.

The Law on Territorial Organization of the Local Self-Government defines the rural settlement as a type of settlement with one functional purpose in which one activity prevails, has agricultural features and functions (Official Gazette, No. 55/2004).

Demographic profile

A total of 136 young people living in rural settlements took part in the quantitative face-to-face survey.

To get an in-depth insight into the background, perceptions and opinions of the group, the quantitative survey was complemented by one focus group.



TOPICS OF INTEREST

Interest in the socio-political developments in the country

How interested are you in the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world?



Compared to other youth groups (general youth and first time voters), rural youth tend to be more interested in socio-political-developments and are more civically engaged. The research shows that almost half (45%) of the respondents are “very” or “somewhat interested” in socio-political development issues, while 54% are “not at all” or “not very” interested. Respondents with higher education tend to have a more pronounced interest in socio-political development issues (76% are “very” or “somewhat interested”). Four out of ten respondents sometimes or often discuss these issues with other people, while six out of ten rarely or never do.

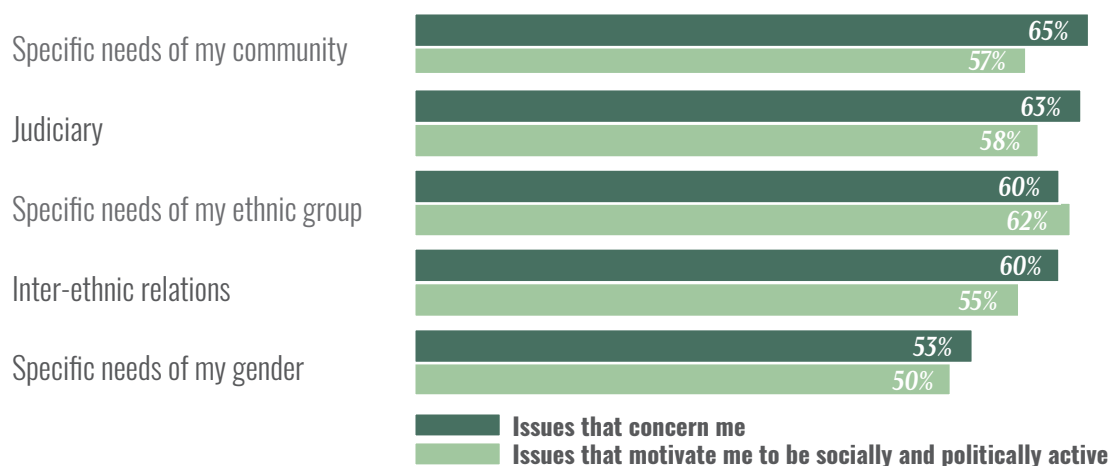
According to the focus group participants, the COVID-19 pandemic ranks the highest among the socio-political issues relevant to the quality of life. Other issues of concern include the current economic situation in the country, unemployment, and social stability.

Concerns

How much would you say the following information/issues/topics concern you?

How much would you say the following issues/topics motivate you to be socially and politically active?





More than 70% of the survey participants indicated that economic and social stability, local issues, and health care (most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic) rank the highest on the list of concerns specific to this group, and are the key driving factors for their social and political activation.

Compared to the other groups included in the research, this group is the least concerned about the specific needs of their gender, ethnic group or interethnic relations in general.

This demographic group expresses dissatisfaction with the quality of life of the young people in rural areas. Concerns were about the lack of cultural events, entertainment and engaging content, due to which young people tend to spend their free time in local cafes and gambling facilities.

Migration also ranks high among the issues of concern, with young people leaving rural areas and moving to bigger places and/or outside the country. The respondents also indicate disinterest in agriculture, a profession which is slowly dying.

Furthermore, the group faces difficulties with public transportation to neighbouring towns, which force young people to travel in groups together and use taxi services instead.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Young people in rural settlements are interested in information concerning sports, entertainment, science, and culture.

Similarly to the young people in general and first time voters, social media (Facebook and Instagram) are the predominant sources of information for rural youth, as indicated by 53% of the survey participants. Despite the popularity of the social media as a source of information, rural youth are concerned about the proliferation of fake news and lack of control over online media.

Two out of ten respondents source information about the current socio-political developments via television, while one out of ten obtains information online.

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f 53%

There is no significant difference with regards to the use of various sources of information across gender, ethnicity, and education profile in this group.

Furthermore, this demographic group is sceptical about the objectivity, independence, and political impartiality of the media in the country, which leads to very low trust in the media.

“ I think the media is inclined towards one or another political party. As if everyone is reporting what is in their favour, everyone is telling their own perspectives of the events, their own version of the truth. ”

Male, 18, Mogila

CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Seventy-three per cent (73%) of the rural youth have never been involved in an event, activity or process that could impact the community or their immediate surroundings, nor are interested in becoming more civically engaged. Interestingly, this demographic group shows the highest motivation for civic engagement in their communities in comparison to first time voters and youth in general.

Have you been involved in any activity that could have affected any change in the community?



Are you interested in more active civic involvement?



Survey respondents with higher education tend to have a pronounced interest in civic involvement.

Fifty-eight per cent (58%) of the survey participants do not believe in making a positive change by individual or NGO engagement, while 25% lack interest in civic engagement, which explains the low motivation for civic participation.

The focus group findings show that young people from rural areas tend to have individualistic approach and become politically active for personal gains (e.g. obtain employment). With regards to political party participation, rural youth view the economic stability (the party as an employment agency) as the highest priority. However, their party membership does not appear to be very effective in policy making and addressing local issues of concern.

The factors that contribute to low civic involvement and participation can be summarized as follows:

- Young people lack unity and collective action to achieve goals due to strong division along political lines;
- Young people focus on personal interests and benefits, particularly employment;
- The family system does not stimulate young people to show proactive behavior.

“ The voice of young people is not heard here. You can have any university degree, but if you aren't a member of a political party, you are nothing. ”

Male, 21, Kosturino

“ I think the problem is that we are all convinced that we have to be party members in order to achieve something and change something. ”

Female, 18, Mogila

Factors that promote involvement

Responsiveness of the institutional system is a key motivator for this group to be more involved in activities that could effectuate change in the community, which is cited by four out of ten respondents. Other important motivating factors are related to their representation interests (indicated by 19%) and prospects for personal or family benefits (indicated by 10%).

Whereas almost half of the respondents (48%) do not believe they can make an impact as a citizen, 29% believe they can make a meaningful impact in their municipality and 7% believe they can impact the ministers (the central government).

Willingness and ability to participate in civic activities

On the question whether they would be willing to participate in civic activities, 44% of the rural youth indicated they would rather prefer to respond to a questionnaire, 38% would meet colleagues and/or friends to discuss local personal or family concerns and 37% would prefer to seek information via brochures or leaflets. The percentage of rural youth that do not prefer to be more active is higher: 82% would not attend a political party meeting, 72% would not attend a public debate and/or an online/zoom meeting, 65% would not participate in civic activities, and 61% would not read an online brochure or leaflet.

In which of the civic activities are you willing to participate?

44%

Respond a questionnaire



37%

Read a brochure or a leaflet



38%

Meet colleagues, friends to discuss



ELECTION PROCESS

Young people from rural areas associate elections with phrases such as: “disaster”, “unnecessary waste of money”, “unnecessary expense of the state budget”, “irregular”, “framed results”. Compared to first time voters and youth in general, rural youth believe more in the importance of citizens’ vote and its impact on election results.

Do you think that every vote is important and can affect the election results?

74%

Yes

21%

No

4%

Refuses to answer

1%

Does not know

Almost three quarters of the survey participants think that every vote is important and can impact election results (74%), while only 21% do not believe so.

More than half of the respondents (57%) indicate that voting per se is not sufficient to engage citizens in activities that can influence policies, three out of ten believe that voting is sufficient, while one out of ten is ignorant on the issue.

Motivation to vote

How regularly do you vote?

65% regularly or often

19% sometimes

8% usually not

4% never

Similarly to the youth in general and first time voters, also included in this research, youth is motivated by actions rather than words. This type of reasoning underlies both their motivation to vote as well as to be politically active and civically engaged.

The research shows that 65% vote almost regularly or often, 19% sometimes, 8% usually do not vote, and 4% never vote.

In addition, 48% of the respondents regularly vote for the same party, while 31% vote for different political parties. This indicates that their support for a particular political party may change if other political options arise.

Factors that influence their decision to vote

Similarly to the general population, the top three factors that influence young people's decision to vote are: perception that voting is a civic right and duty (55%), prospects for better future (37%), and fear that someone would steal their vote (21%).

55%

Civic right and duty



37%

Better future



21%

Fear that someone will steal their vote



In addition, this group emphasises the political pressure to vote because in small villages “everybody knows everything about everyone”

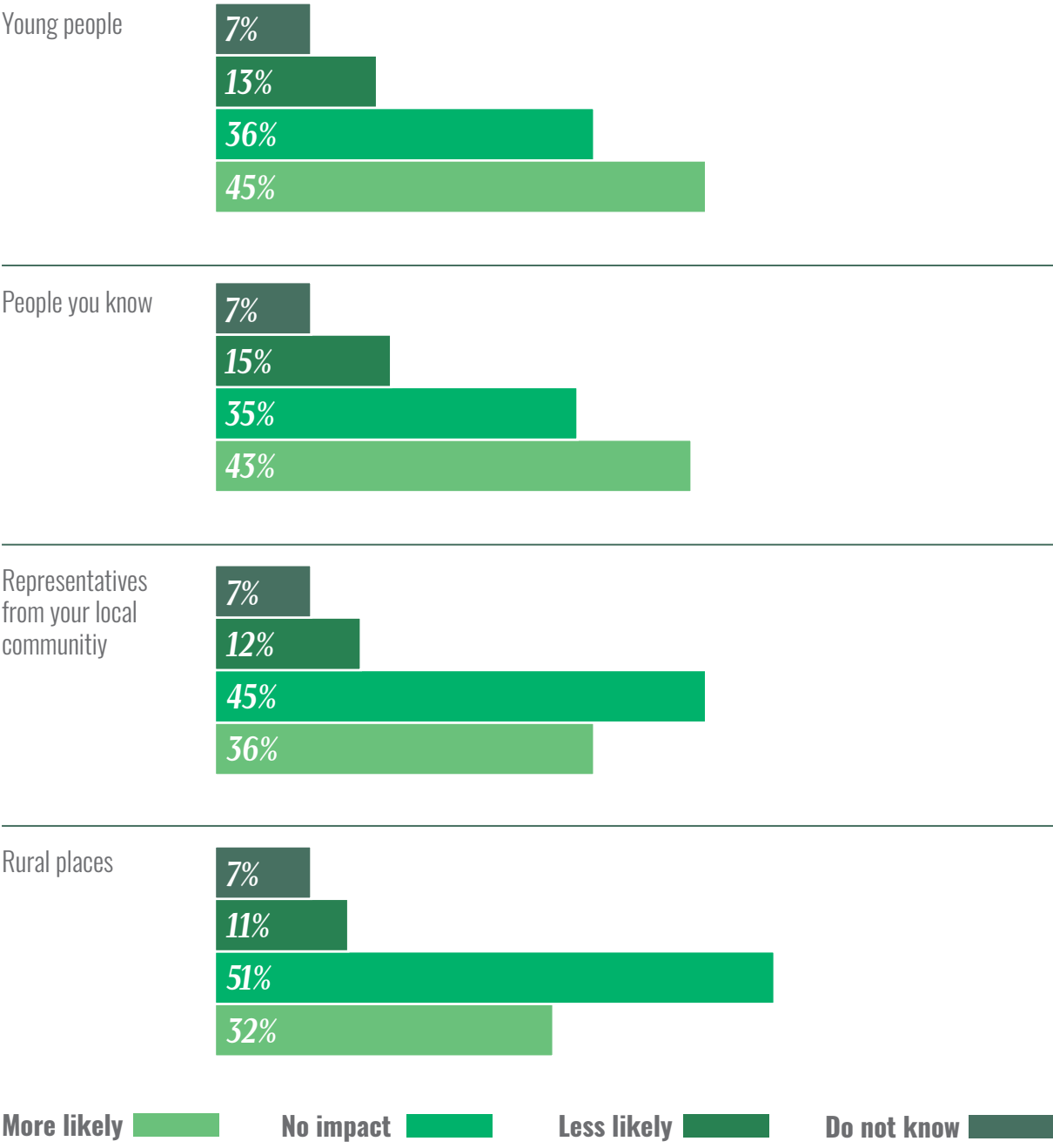
The survey participants would like to see more representatives of Roma people, youth, and familiar people on the candidate or council lists. More than half of the respondents (53%) indicate that their decision to vote is the same or most often the same as that of their families, while for 43% this differs from their families.

Six out of ten respondents' decisions to vote is not influenced by their friends.

“ If you don't vote, you're afraid someone might say you haven't voted. We don't know whether people vote for a certain political party or if they invalidate their ballot, but we know that there is political influence in everything. I think people are too frightened to stay at home. ”

Male, 24, Kalaslari

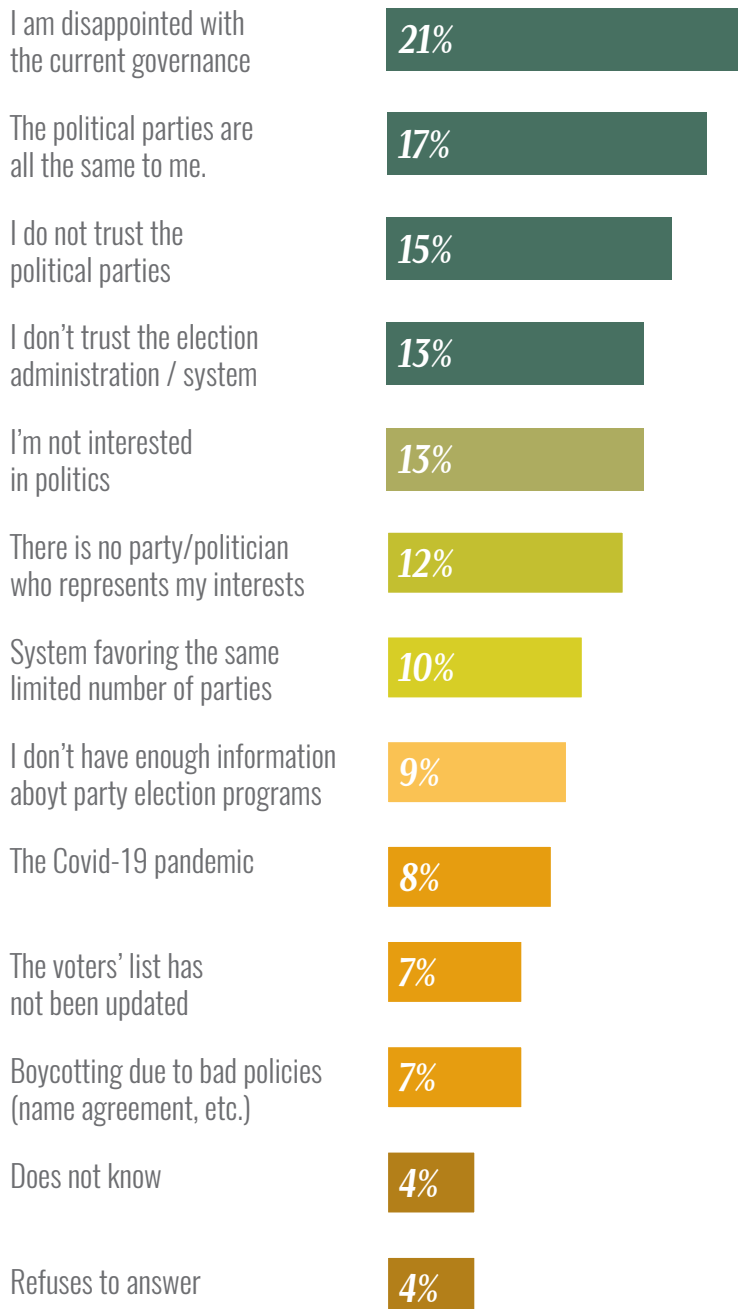
If there are representatives of the following groups on the candidate lists, how likely is it that you would vote for that political party?



Demotivation to vote

Dissatisfaction with the incumbent government and the political parties is the key factor that influences the rural youth to abstain from voting.

What can influence your decision not to vote?



“ I think there are two types of people who do not vote. The first are those who are disappointed with the political parties, and the second are people who do not depend on political parties, therefore the election results do not have a significant effect on the quality of their life. ”

Female, 26, Prshovce

The majority believe that the interests of the rural population are not addressed equally by the political parties



“ I think the rural areas are neglected. It happens to see road repair two days before the elections, they only start working then. You can understand their strategy very easily. ”

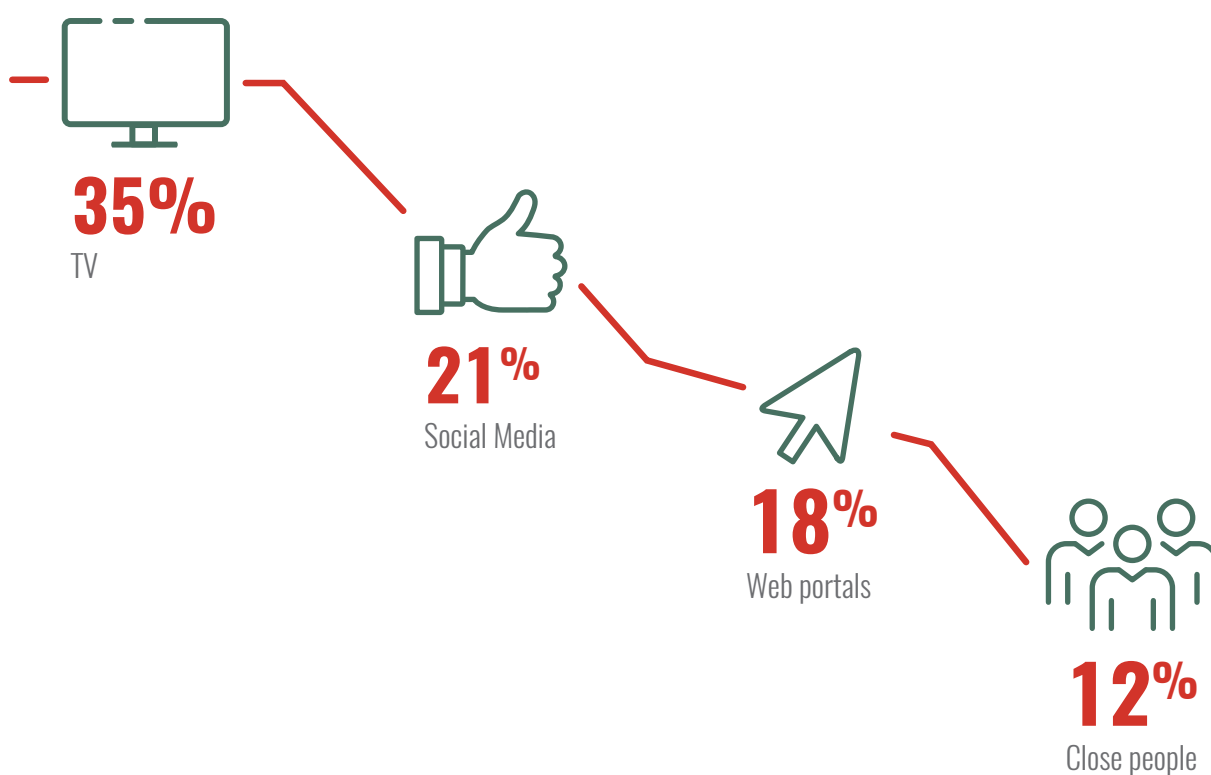
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COMMUNICATION WITH CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

The predominant sources of election-related information are TV (35%), social media (21%), web portals (18%), friends and family members (12%).

News (42%) and TV debates (30%) are the most practiced ways of sourcing election information by the survey participants.

Where do you get information about election?



With regards to the communication with candidates, this group prefers personal or door-to-door communication (18%) and communication in smaller groups (17%). The tendency is to rely on the previous track record of the politicians when making an informed decision. With regards to **obtaining information about the candidates in the election period**, rural youth also rely on the candidates' track record and the social media.

Of note is that only one in ten respondents **both before and in-between elections** prefer to receive information through political programs. They would like to be informed about previous achievements and results of the candidate rather than be introduced with political programs in the election period.

Nevertheless, the survey participants point out that the political parties visit their villages **only during the pre-election period**. With bitterness, they state that these visits have only one goal - promoting the party and winning votes.

“ We have only one road that we use in order to reach another regional road and the biggest promise before every election is that the road will be constructed. Many years have passed, but the road was not asphalted until the village decided to boycott the elections. After we did this, they finally asphalted the road. ”

Male, 24, Kalaslari

This demographic group has the following expectations from the political parties and government:

- ♦ Economic development and stability
- ♦ Creating opportunities for youth employment
- ♦ Improving the educational system
- ♦ Improving basic conditions of the rural population such as sewerage and water supply

BARRIERS

Compared to the youth in general, rural youth are more willing to actively participate in civic and political life. As a group, they are more interested in socio-political developments and have a good understanding of the election process and its importance.

The political participation of every underrepresented or politically marginalized group or lack thereof is very important. Some of the barriers identified by youth in general - doubts about their impact, youth underrepresentation, availability of channels to express their needs and concerns - are more pronounced by this group. Similarly to the general youth group, rural youth voters should be further motivated to engage in civic and political activities.

- ♦ **Stronger feeling of underrepresentation:** Rural youth feel that their concerns are not addressed by their representatives, and no elected officials from this demographic group hold office
- ♦ **Disbelief in their power** to influence issues and policies of their concern
- ♦ **Lack of communication** with officials, candidates, and non-government organizations
- ♦ **Belief in general politicization** of the society and reduced focus on policies and issues of concern for the citizens

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations for the general youth are also relevant and applicable to this group.

One of the most important recommendations to engage rural youth voters is to harness their higher willingness to participate in civic and political activities by creating and promoting conditions and channels that will facilitate such participation.

The specific recommendations for communication and interaction with rural youth are:

Focus on issues that concern rural youth

Local issues that can contribute to a better quality of life such as transportation, entertainment, and employment, being the key concerns expressed by survey participants.

Improve their negative perception of being underrepresented by elected officials

Consistently include, discuss, and address issues of concern to the rural youth in the public agenda of relevant political representatives both during and in-between elections.

- ♦ Encourage politicians and activists affiliated to major political parties to promote rural youth needs.

Strengthen their belief that they can make an impact in the community and society

- ♦ Promote positive examples of recognized and respected rural youth activists in the community and emphasize the impact of their accomplishments. Showcase examples that prove that activism matters and has the power to rectify the society.
- ♦ Promote small community projects and initiatives that tackle various issues of concern for the rural youth.
- ♦ Disseminate positive examples using different formats such as testimonials, third-party stories and community projects on a micro-level facilitated by a political party or other organization.

Establish channels for regular and close communications with rural youth

- ♦ Harness the potential of personal/direct contact to motivate and influence rural youth involvement and participation in civic activities and the election process.
- ♦ Consider formats and channels such as: informal meetings, community projects, regular check-ups, organization of small entertainment events or visits to events in other cities, etc.

Strengthen the capacities of rural youth to participate in civic and political life

Organize free programs on public speaking, debating, and project management to develop confidence to participate in civic and political life.

Create alliances

In addition to creating alliances with the media, establishing alliances with local youth organizations and influencers are also important in order to mobilize the rural youth. Partnering with local micro-influencers active in different areas of young people's life will increase their interest and willingness to engage.

Use relevant communication channels

- ♦ Focus on direct communication with rural youth. Consider direct, informal meetings focused on relevant topics.
- ♦ Use social media as the main information channel as it has the greatest potential for engagement and participation: promote topics of rural youth life, promote rural youth positive examples, provide opportunities to express their opinion (polls, debates, commentaries, etc.)
- ♦ Use TV during the election process, particularly news, debates and candidates' presentation.
- ♦ Organize entertaining activities and events. Such events could spark interest and attendance due to a general lack of organized entertainment in rural areas.