FROM PLAY TO PARTICIPATION:
SPORT AS A SPACE FOR DEMOCRACY

A synthesis of cross-country focus-group research and expert dialogue on the role of grassroots sport in strengthening civic engagement and active citizenship in Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.

Sport for Democratic Participation



Prepared by BG Be Active
Lead partner, Sport for Democratic Participation (SDP)
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia, sport is one of the few institutions young people still trust, yet it remains structurally unable to turn that trust into democratic participation. Drawing on a five-month, mixed-method study by BG Be Active and its partners - national policy analysis, 15 focus groups with 231 participants, and a public webinar on 23 June 2026 - this paper sets out the context, the problem, the evidence and the agreed direction of travel.

1.1 THE PROBLEM

All four countries share a single structural pattern: sport ecosystems that are centralised and oriented toward high-performance (elite) sport. Funding and political attention concentrate on medals, while a governance culture marked by politicisation, clientelism and nepotism sidelines youth, women and persons with disabilities from decision-making. Trust in formal institutions is correspondingly low - distrust reaches 83% in Bulgaria, while only 26% in Serbia and 19% in Romania trust their national institutions.

1.2 RESEARCH AND FINDINGS:

- Sport is a latent civic infrastructure. A high-trust, low-threshold space where young people already practise cooperation, fairness and conflict management, a “micro-institution” whose democratic potential is only partially realised.
- The barriers are unequally felt, as the elite, politicized model compounds inequalities of gender, ethnicity, disability, geography and income - from the masculinisation of sport and women’s absence from leadership to “invisible barriers” for people with disabilities and the exclusion of NEET youth, Roma communities and rural populations.
- Webinar polling ranked “political and structural barriers” and “limited transparency” as the biggest obstacles, and valued the coach above all as a role model for values, ethics and fair play.

1.3 EDUCATION THROUGH SPORT AND STEPPING-UP INTO ACTION

The binding constraint is neither young people's willingness to participate nor sport's capacity to host it, but the governance and facilitation layer in between. The fastest, highest-impact lever is a new generation of facilitators - coaches and youth workers repositioned as civic educators and social mentors, trained not only in technique but in democratic facilitation, safeguarding and inclusive practice, and supported by school-based entry points, genuine youth voice, and inclusion made a condition of funding. BG Be Active now translates this evidence into action through a Train-the-Trainer seminar (Belgrade, November 2026), transnational SDP Labs, 16 local pilot actions, and a multilingual toolkit for replication.

IN A NUTSHELL: DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION NEEDS ACCESSIBLE, TRUSTED SPACES IN WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE CAN PRACTISE DECISION-MAKING AND SPORT IS ONE OF THE FEW SPACES THE MOST DISENGAGED STILL TRUST.

1.4 SPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION (SDP) - MEET THE PROJECT

Across Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia, sport is one of the few institutions that young people still trust - yet it remains structurally unable to channel that trust into democratic participation. This is the central finding of the Sport for Democratic Participation (SDP) research cycle: a five-month, mixed-method qualitative study coordinated by BG Be Active, combining national policy analysis with 15 focus groups and 230 participants across the four countries, validated and extended through the project's public webinar of 23 June 2026, *From Play to Participation: Sport as a Space for Democracy*.

The evidence points to a shared structural pattern across the four countries. Public sport ecosystems remain largely centralised and oriented towards high-performance (elite) sport, concentrating funding and political attention on competitive outcomes rather than broad participation. This contributes to governance environments affected by politicisation, limited transparency and unequal access to decision-making, with young people, women and persons with disabilities often underrepresented in governance processes. At the same time, the SDP needs analysis identified low levels of confidence in formal institutions as a recurring challenge, reinforcing young people's perception of distance from traditional decision-making processes.

Against this backdrop, participants and panellists identified sport itself as a "latent civic infrastructure": a high-trust, low-threshold space where young people already practise cooperation, rule-adherence, fairness and conflict management. Activating that potential does not require new institutions so much as a new generation of facilitators - coaches and youth workers repositioned as civic educators and social mentors. This is the most feasible, highest-impact reform lever the research identified, and it is the lever BG Be Active and its partners are now equipped to deliver.

STATS AT A GLANCE

- **230 participants · 15 focus groups · 4 countries · policy analysis + focus groups + live webinar polling**
- **Institutional trust emerged as a key structural challenge across the four participating countries, with young people describing limited confidence in formal institutions and decision-making processes.**
- **Across the focus groups, young people highlighted barriers to participation, including limited opportunities for meaningful involvement, lack of transparency and weak connections with decision-makers.**
- **Webinar audiences ranked "political and structural barriers" and "limited transparency" as the greatest obstacles.**
- **The most-valued coach role was "role model for values, ethics and fair play", ahead of "community builder" and "social mentor".**

This paper sets out the context, the problem, the evidence and the agreed direction of travel. It is intended to support BG Be Active's engagement with municipal, national and European institutions, and to document the organisation's expertise in using sport as a tool to strengthen democratic engagement and active citizenship.

2. WHY SPORT, WHY NOW

Across Europe (with Western Balkans and Eastern Europe in focus) democratic disengagement is rising fastest among the people hardest to reach through conventional channels: youth, marginalised communities, and those disconnected from formal education or political structures. Traditional civic-education formats often fail to engage these groups in a meaningful way. Sport and physical-activity settings, by contrast, remain accessible, embedded in daily life, and trusted - and therefore largely untapped as spaces for civic learning.

The premise is supported by both EU policy and scholarship. Since the Treaty of Lisbon, sport has had an explicit legal basis at EU level (Article 165 TFEU), and the EU Work Plan for Sport positions it as a cross-cutting instrument for solidarity, equality, respect for diversity and civic participation. Academic work frames sport as a "microcosm of society" in which democratic behaviours are internalised through direct experience, and as a generator of social capital - networks of trust and reciprocity. Critically, however, the same literature cautions that sport is not inherently democratic: where governance is exclusionary, it can just as easily reproduce inequality. Its democratic value depends on how it is designed and governed.

THAT CONDITIONALITY IS THE STARTING POINT FOR THIS RESEARCH. THE QUESTION SDP SET OUT TO ANSWER WAS NOT WHETHER SPORT *CAN* SUPPORT DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION, BUT UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS – AND WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY.

3. THE PROBLEM: A SHARED STRUCTURAL PATTERN

The research conducted during the first phase of the project and presented during the webinar by the lead research partner, REGSPO (Montenegro), and specifically by Dr. Marko Begović, identified the same structural trend in every country. Three features define it.

3.1 AN ELITE-ORIENTED, CENTRALISED MODEL

Sport ecosystems in all four countries **are vertically structured** and oriented toward high-performance sport. The majority of public resources and political attention flow toward **medals and elite pathways**, while grassroots and community sport receive ad-hoc or limited support. Decision-making and funding are concentrated centrally; grassroots clubs operate as nominally autonomous civil-society structures but are in practice dependent on public funding and administrative priorities.

> **"EVERYTHING IS SUBORDINATED TO PROFESSIONAL SPORT, WHERE ONLY VICTORY MATTERS. THAT'S WHERE THE MOST MONEY IS, AND WHERE MONEY DOMINATES, THAT'S WHERE THE ELITE LIVES."**
>
> *focus-group participant, Montenegro*

3.2 POLITICISATION, CLIENTELISM AND AN EXCLUSIONARY GOVERNANCE CULTURE

Where political attention concentrates, politicised governance follows. Participants across countries described nepotism, clientelist networks and limited transparency in the bodies that govern sport. This is most acute in Montenegro and Serbia, where politicisation is tied to broader state capture, but it is present everywhere. The consequence is a closed governance culture that sidelines exactly the groups the project seeks to reach.

> **"THERE IS INJUSTICE IN COMPETITIVE SPORT… THE BEST PLAYERS DO NOT PLAY, INSTEAD 'DADDY'S BOYS'CHILDREN OF POLITICIANS AND BUSINESSMEN PLAY. CONNECTIONS, ESPECIALLY POLITICAL ONES, DECIDE TEAM COMPOSITION. POLITICS IS THE CAPTAIN AND COACH."**
>
> *focus-group participant, Montenegro*

During the webinar, live polling of the European and Balkan audience confirmed this diagnosis from the practitioner side: attendees ranked "political and structural barriers" and "limited transparency" as the single biggest obstacles to using sport as a tool for civic participation — the same barriers the focus groups surfaced from the ground up.

3.3 LOW INSTITUTIONAL TRUST AND SIDELINED YOUTH

These structural features contribute to a deep deficit of trust in formal institutions, which is particularly experienced by young people. Across the four participating countries, the SDP needs analysis identified low levels of confidence in public institutions as a recurring challenge affecting democratic engagement and young people's relationship with formal decision-making processes.

While the available national evidence draws on different sources and uses different measures of institutional trust, it points to a broader pattern of distance between citizens and formal institutions. This context contributes to feelings of exclusion and reduced motivation to engage through traditional civic and democratic channels.

The findings from the SDP qualitative research further explore how this broader lack of trust is experienced by young people, particularly in relation to opportunities for participation, representation and engagement through sport and community activities.

“WHATEVER WE DO, ADULTS DO NOT TAKE US INTO CONSIDERATION. AFTER PROTESTS OR ELECTIONS, WE DO NOT SEE ANY CHANGE.”

focus-group participant, Bulgaria

“NO ONE ASKS US FOR OUR OPINION. WE, YOUNG PEOPLE, PRACTICALLY DON’T EXIST, EXCEPT DURING THE POLITICAL ELECTIONS.”

focus-group participant, Montenegro



4. THE RESEARCH: SCOPE AND METHOD

The SDP research applied a multilevel, mixed-method qualitative design. The first phase analysed the legal framework, policy setting and institutional arrangements in each country. The second phase conducted semi-structured focus groups with youth, grassroots coaches, fitness trainers, sport administrators, youth workers and students. The third phase compared findings across countries to separate convergence (shared issues) from divergence (country-specific dynamics). Analysis used reflexive thematic analysis, situated within institutional theory and social-capital frameworks.

In total the study engaged **230 participants** across **15 focus groups** in the four countries, deliberately recruiting marginalised and under-represented groups — NEET youth, Roma communities, women, persons with disabilities, first-time voters and rural populations — alongside sport professionals.

Country	Focus groups	Participants	Sites / notable composition
Bulgaria	4	60	Plovdiv & Burgas; sports school, university, youth centre
Montenegro	6	54	South, Central & North regions
Romania	3	66	Vicovu de Sus, Broșteni (flood-affected), Suceava; incl. 15 Roma participants
Serbia	2	50	Kopaonik & Valjevo; coaches, athletes, volunteers, PwD inclusion
Total	15	230	Policy analysis + focus groups across 4 countries

Table 2. Research scope. The webinar presentation summarised the sample as "nearly 200" stakeholders; the consolidated national reports total 230 participants.

This design — capturing urban and rural contexts, beneficiaries and professionals, majority and minority communities — allows the findings to be read both as a regional pattern and as a set of country-specific realities, summarised next.

4.1 COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DYNAMICS

While the structural pattern is shared, its dominant expression differs. In Bulgaria and Romania, the leading narrative is socio-economic and territorial inequality — limited grassroots funding, rural exclusion and a gap between inclusion commitments and local delivery. In Montenegro and Serbia, the dominant discourse is politicisation and clientelism tied to state capture and exclusive governance bodies.

- **Bulgaria**: inclusive access for vulnerable groups and the need for tailored coaching; structural socio-economic and spatial

inequalities; a disconnect between policy commitments and local implementation, and weak horizontal coordination between sport and youth policy.

- **Romania**: a socialist-era legacy of high-performance orientation; rural underfunding and degraded infrastructure; institutional fragmentation; and multiple inequalities affecting Roma and NEET youth.
- **Montenegro**: sport governing bodies perceived as extensions of clientelist networks; nepotism undermining meritocracy; symbolic youth participation and precarious employment for coaches.
- **Serbia**: overwhelming politicisation and limited transparency; acute rural–urban inequality; and deficiencies in architectural accessibility for persons with disabilities.

4.2 WHAT SPORT ALREADY DOES WELL

Crucially, the research did not find sport to be broken. Participants in every country described it as a powerful, high-trust space. Motivations to take part cluster around health, socialisation, belonging, personal development and mental well-being, and sport was repeatedly cited as an effective alternative to risk behaviours. Participants described sport as a "mini-model of society" where they learn to collaborate, manage conflict and navigate group dynamics — the very competences active citizenship requires.

The Romanian study captured the paradox precisely: against low trust in political institutions, the coach–athlete relationship was described as fair, predictable and merit-based, with rules clearly and uniformly applied. Sport thus functions as a "micro-institution" that partially compensates for deficits in macro-institutional trust — but that interpersonal trust does not yet translate into trust in, or influence over, the institutions that govern sport. The research names this gap a "partially realised democratic potential": sport socialises young people into cooperation and responsibility, but does not yet give them a role in rule-making or governance.

5. THROUGH A GENDER AND INCLUSION LENS

The barriers above are not experienced equally. A consistent finding across all four countries is that the elite, politicised model reproduces and compounds existing inequalities - of gender, ethnicity, disability, geography and socio-economic status. Reading the evidence through a gender and inclusion lens is therefore not an add-on; it is essential to understanding who is excluded and why.

5.1 GENDER

Gender inequality operates on two levels: access to participation and access to leadership. In mainstream urban settings, participation can appear relatively balanced - but the picture changes sharply across contexts. In Bulgaria, an educator observed that for many girls the binding constraint is economic rather than infrastructural; in certain minority communities, deeply entrenched cultural norms, early marriage and restricted mobility make participation a question of social acceptability rather than availability. In Romania, participants reported the persistent masculinisation of sport: sports seen as "for boys", informal discouragement of girls, low visibility of female athletes, and a near-absence of women in leadership.

> **"FOR GIRLS, THERE ARE NO MAJOR STRUCTURAL BARRIERS, THE FACILITIES ARE AVAILABLE. THE MAIN PROBLEM IS FINANCIAL."**
>
> *focus-group participant, Bulgaria*

Two further gendered dynamics emerged strongly. First, discriminatory coaching directed at women — in Montenegro, participants described male coaches publicly mocking inexperienced women, including one account of sustained humiliation during a faculty entrance process. Second, the career–life balance penalty: women described being forced to end sporting careers early for lack of structural support.

> **“OUR WOMEN ARE OFTEN FORCED TO INTERRUPT THEIR CAREERS, WHILE IN SOME OTHER SYSTEMS… THEY PLAY EVEN AFTER THE AGE OF 40 BECAUSE THEY HAVE SUPPORT TO BALANCE PRIVATE LIFE AND SPORT.”**
>
> *focus-group participant, Kopaonik, Serbia*

The under-representation of women in leadership is not only an equity problem; the research frames it as a governance-quality problem, because it narrows the diversity and deliberative capacity of the bodies that make decisions. Recommended responses include gender-equity plans and anti-discrimination mechanisms in sport policy, representation in governance structures, mentorship for women, and visible female role models.

5.2 PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

For persons with disabilities, the barriers are both physical and symbolic. The Serbian report’s account of a donated pool lift in Valjevo - unused for years for “lack of goodwill” from management — captures how a technical failure becomes an “invisible barrier” signalling unequal social value. Psychological barriers — shame, fear of judgement - compound inaccessible infrastructure and limited inclusive programming. The recommended response is to make accessibility a condition of public funding, backed by mandatory, regular accessibility audits of public sports facilities.

> **“THERE IS A LIFT THAT LOWERS INTO THE POOL, BUT IT CURRENTLY DOESN’T FUNCTION BECAUSE THERE IS NO ‘GOODWILL’ FROM THE SERVICE PROVIDER. IT’S EASIER FOR THEM TO HAVE SWIMMERS IN THE OPEN, RATHER THAN PROVIDING SPACE FOR US.”**
>
> *focus-group participant, Valjevo, Serbia*

5.3 NEET YOUTH, ROMA COMMUNITIES AND RURAL POPULATIONS

NEET youth were described as functionally invisible to the institutions meant to serve them — in Bulgaria, one participant called them "free electrons" who do not register with labour bureaus and so cannot be reached. Roma participants in Romania's focus groups reported direct experiences of discrimination and exclusion, in sport and in access to community resources. And territorial inequality cuts across all of these: in Bulgaria, around 38% of municipalities run no targeted youth activities in rural or small settlements, and roughly 50% have no dedicated youth budget line at all — so the very communities with the fewest alternatives also have the least provision.

> **"THEY FUNCTION AS 'FREE ELECTRONS' – THEY DO NOT REGISTER WITH LABOUR BUREAUS, MAKING THEM IMPOSSIBLE TO REACH."**
>
> *focus-group participant, Bulgaria*

A universalist sport policy, the research warns, risks reproducing rather than reducing these inequalities. Reaching these groups requires targeted, funded programmes; community mediators and facilitators drawn from the target groups themselves; and intersectoral partnerships across sport, education, social services and youth policy.

6. FROM EVIDENCE TO DIALOGUE: THE WEBINAR

On 23 June 2026, BG Be Active convened the public webinar From Play to Participation: Sport as a Space for Democracy, bringing together practitioners from across Europe and the Balkans. The session paired the research presentation with live audience polling and an international expert panel, testing the findings against practitioner experience and translating them into a direction for action.

6.1 WHAT THE AUDIENCE SAID: LIVE POLLING

The live polls produced two clear signals. On barriers, attendees identified "*political and structural barriers*" and "*limited transparency*" as the greatest obstacles to using sport for civic participation — independently corroborating the focus-group diagnosis. On the role of the grassroots coach, participants ranked the functions as follows:

1. Role model for values, ethics and fair play
2. Community builder who creates inclusive, safe and healthy environments
3. Social mentor for support, communication and personal development

The ranking matters strategically. It shows that practitioners already see the coach's role as fundamentally civic and relational, not merely technical — which is precisely the repositioning the project is built to support.

6.2 WHAT THE EXPERTS SAID: PANEL INSIGHTS

Coaching as social mentorship — Nataša Janković (Olympic Committee of Serbia) argued that the goal is not to change a coach's identity but to give them the tools to recognise and use the educational role they already hold. She cited Serbia's Olympic Values Education Programme, which has reached over **24,000 pupils** and **1,500 teachers**, as a working model grounded in experiential learning — experience, reflect, implement — rather than lectures.

Genuine versus symbolic inclusion — Fabio Figueras (sport governance, integrity and compliance) drew a sharp line between symbolic youth representation and genuine voice in decision-making. Organisational statutes, he noted, often contain barriers that keep young people out of leadership. Policy frameworks are necessary, but organisations must proactively create environments where youth are encouraged to engage rather than sidelined. In response to the student representative's question about whether change should come "from the top down" or "from the bottom up," Figueras argued for a complementary approach: constitutional and policy change is required from the top, while youth must be proactive in seeking engagement — because, as he himself said, one-size-fits-all solutions do not exist across organisations.

Sport diplomacy and trust — Dr Simon Rofe (sport diplomacy and international politics) described how transnational partnerships can compensate for weak or fragmented national institutions through the "*convening power*" of sport. Where trust in traditional institutions is low, the ecosystem of coaches, players and families functions as a unit, and sport offers a rare space for building trust and teaching values through mutual respect.

The line that captures it

> **"I THINK I CONTRIBUTE MORE WHEN I DO A GOOD TRAINING SESSION WITH CHILDREN THAN ANY VOTE OF MINE ON PAPER."**
>
> *Sports student, Kopaonik / Leposavić, Serbia. The challenge SDP addresses is to connect that proven, grassroots civic energy to the formal structures that currently exclude it.*

7. WHAT THE EVIDENCE CONCLUDES

Read together, the focus groups and the webinar point to one conclusion: the binding constraint is not young people's willingness to participate, nor sport's capacity to host that participation, but the governance and facilitation layer in between. The research ranks reform levers by feasibility and impact, and the priority is clear.

Reform lever	Feasibility	Direction
School sport & PE curricula	Medium–High	Embed soft-skills and civic learning; realistic, high-impact entry point
Coaching programmes & licensing	Medium–High	Merit-based licensing tied to pedagogy, safeguarding, gender mainstreaming and soft skills
Funding mechanisms	Low–Medium	Transparent criteria; rebalance elite vs. sport-for-all (politically sensitive)
Good-governance culture	Low–Medium	Depoliticisation; plural, transparent bodies; genuine youth representation

Figure 3. Reform levers by feasibility (SDP cross-country synthesis). The two highest-feasibility levers both run through the facilitator.

The strategic implication is that the fastest, most durable route to activating sport's democratic potential runs through the facilitator: the coach, trainer or youth worker. Structural reform of funding and governance is necessary but slow and politically contested; redesigning how facilitators are trained and licensed is both feasible now and directly addresses the pedagogical mismatch the research documented — the "generational communication gap" between traditional, performance-first coaching and the expectations of contemporary youth.

> **"WE SPEAK ENTIRELY DIFFERENT LANGUAGES – IT'S LIKE A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A CHINESE AND A GREEK SPEAKER."**
>
> *focus-group participant, Bulgaria*

Central to every recommendation, across all four countries, is therefore the development of a new generation of facilitators able to translate policy aspirations into inclusive, participatory practice on the ground — coaches trained not only in technique but in democratic facilitation, communication, conflict management, safeguarding and gender-sensitive, inclusive practice.

A SHARED AGENDA FOR CHANGE

The research and panel converge on a coherent, cross-country agenda:

- Reposition the coach as civic facilitator and social mentor — through experiential-learning methods and continuous professional development tied to merit-based licensing.
- Use schools as entry points — align PE and school-based sport with civic education and soft-skills development.
- Move from symbolic to genuine youth voice — establish youth and athlete councils within clubs and federations, with real influence on decisions.
- Make inclusion a funding condition — accessibility audits, gender-equity plans and targeted programmes for NEET youth, Roma communities and rural populations.
- Rebalance funding toward grassroots — transparent, accountable criteria and youth-sensitive budgeting, alongside (not instead of) elite pathways.
- Build regional coalitions — cross-border cooperation, shared indicators and transferable tools, using the convening power of sport to compensate for fragmented national institutions.

8. EDUCATION THROUGH SPORT (ETS): APPLYING THE METHODOLOGY

The reform levers the evidence, prioritizing a new generation of facilitators, relying on the method Education Through Sport (ETS). ETS treats sport as a structured learning environment in which teamwork, rules and fair play carry democratic values - participation, inclusion and the rule of law. Both the focus groups and the webinar converged on the same mechanism: experiential, "learning-by-doing" practice built on Kolb's cycle of experience, reflect, implement, rather than lectures. Serbia's Olympic Values Education Programme, cited at the webinar as a working model, has reached over 24,000 pupils and 1,500 teachers on exactly this basis.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US ABOUT ETS WORK

- Embedding civic content inside existing sport activities raised acceptability and reduced resistance; presenting it as a separate intervention did not.
- Time pressure routinely crowds out the post-activity discussion where learning is consolidated - the step that turns a game into education. Reflection is the missing ingredient.
- The hidden educational agenda backfires, as one youth worker put it, "if you call them for volleyball, but in reality you do something else, they will get offended."
- Experiential formats tested in the field like "Silent Power" (non-verbal leadership), a "Community Budget" simulation, "Agree/ Disagree" and the World Café method - show how democratic practice can be staged through play.

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR ADAPTING THE ETS METHODOLOGY

1. Start with and from the activity, not the lecture. Design each session as a game or drill that carries the civic learning inside it, then debrief.
2. Reserve fixed time to move through experience → reflection →

implementation; never let it be the first thing cut.

3. Be open about the learning goal so participants opt in; transparency, not disguise, keeps them engaged.
4. Equip coaches to use the educational role they already hold, with respectful, psychologically-informed communication that closes the generational gap. We do not need to replace the coach, ETS shows what the coach needs is tools for success.
5. Use votes, team decisions and athlete councils so young people practise rule-formation, not only rule-compliance. Let participants make the rules, not just follow them.
6. Adapt activities for women and girls, NEET youth, Roma communities and persons with disabilities, and pair gender-sensitivity with safeguarding by design.
7. Build on Kolb's experiential cycle, the Olympic Values Education Programme and BG Be Active's MOVE & LEARN manual, so pilots can be replicated rather than reinvented.

FROM METHOD TO ROLLOUT. THESE GUIDELINES ARE THE OPERATIONAL CORE OF THE TRAIN-THE-TRAINER SEMINAR, THE SDP LABS AND THE MULTILINGUAL FACILITATOR TOOLKIT SET OUT IN THE NEXT SECTION.

9. BG BE ACTIVE'S ROLE AND THE ROAD AHEAD

The next phase of the Sport for Democratic Participation (SDP) project will build on the research findings through training, co-creation of methodologies and local pilot initiatives. Four interconnected activities will be implemented:

- Train the Trainer Seminar (Belgrade, November 2026), equipping coaches, trainers and youth workers with the Education Through Sport (ETS) methodology, gamification-based approaches and inclusive practices.
- International SDP Labs in Bulgaria and Montenegro, where representatives of the target groups will take part in co-creating and testing new formats for sport, civic participation and community activation.
- 16 pilot initiatives across the four partner countries, through which the developed approaches will be tested, refined and validated in real-life settings.
- The multilingual SDP Toolkit, a practical resource designed to support the implementation and adaptation of the project's methodologies and ensure their sustainability beyond the project's lifetime.

This sequence - **research, dialogue, training, piloting and knowledge sharing** - reflects the project's core belief that **civic engagement is built through accessible and inclusive spaces where young people can meaningfully participate in decision-making**. Sport remains one of the few such spaces that continues to earn the trust of young people, including those who are the most distant from formal democratic processes.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER FOR INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS?

- **It provides a robust comparative evidence base on the governance barriers to inclusive sport across four European countries, supporting the development of public policies and local strategies.**
- **It demonstrates that investing in the training and professional development of coaches and facilitators is one of the most practical ways to strengthen democratic participation through sport.**
- **It offers solutions that are already being tested within the project and demonstrates how international cooperation can transform research findings into sustainable practices.**

As the project coordinator, **BG Be Active** will continue working with its international partners to strengthen sport as a space for learning, collaboration and youth engagement. **The project's methodologies and tools are designed to support coaches, youth workers and organisations in using sport as a vehicle for developing civic competences, fostering active participation and strengthening local communities.**

SOURCES:

SDP Focus Groups Report - Synthesis Analysing Shared Barriers

Civic Learning Gaps (national reports, BG/ME/RO/RS), and the SDP webinar From Play to Participation, 23 June 2026.

DISCLAIMER:

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