



Paris



SRNT-E CONFERENCE

21-23 SEPT 2026



**BOOK
OF ABSTRACTS**



Community Engagement and Policy Dialog in Advancing Tobacco Control Legislation in North Macedonia

A. Stamenova¹, S. Janevska², E. Kostovska Prilepcanska², M. Jarikj Bojkoska², K. Stavrikj²

¹Institute of Social Medicine | University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Medicine, Skopje,, Macedonia [FYROM]

²Center for Family medicine, University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Medicine, Skopje, Macedonia [FYROM]

Background: Legislative liberalization has contributed to the normalization of tobacco use and delayed tobacco control policies in North Macedonia. In response, the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the WHO Country Office and the Faculty of Medicine-Skopje, intensified efforts to strengthen tobacco control through behavioral research, implementation of the Global Youth Tobacco Survey, brief tobacco cessation interventions in primary healthcare, strengthening cessation services, stakeholder coordination, and support for a new Smoking Protection Law.

Aims: This study examines public and stakeholders' engagement activities and their contribution to advancing national tobacco control legislation.

Methods: Between November and December 2024 with support from the World Health Organization (WHO) in North Macedonia, we conducted 5 public forums and 3 focus groups engaging more than 250 participants, including university students, healthcare professionals, patients and media representatives. Four main themes evolved from the thematic data analysis: (1) public perceptions on tobacco use and smoking; (2) barriers for healthy lifestyle; (3) communication strategies; (4) community-informed activities for policy action.

Results: Participants demonstrated high awareness of tobacco-related harms but emphasized the strong social normalization, particularly in public spaces. Smoking was perceived as a social behaviour rather than a health hazard. Novel tobacco and nicotine products, including e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products, were perceived by many, especially the students, as safer alternatives to traditional smoking. Social pressures, limited awareness of cessation services and weak legal enforcement were identified as barriers to cessation. Participants expressed strong support for stricter tobacco control measures and smoke-free environments. Health professionals and family members were identified as trusted sources for communication on tobacco harms. Participants highlighted the value of personal narratives, youth-targeted messaging, civil society engagement, educational institutions and media partnerships as crucial in shifting social norms.

Conclusion: Public engagement activities provided context-specific evidence linking social norms, policy gaps and tobacco control needs in North Macedonia. These participatory processes helped translate the public perspectives into policy action, being presented at the Parliamentary Health Commission along with research conducted in North Macedonia, urging MPs to take action for comprehensive legislation protecting the public from the harmful effects of tobacco and nicotine products.

