

ERASMUS+ COOPERATION PARTNERSHIPS IN SPORT “FIT-BALKANS”

Project n° 101049997_Fit-Balkans

Policy-Makers Report



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- About the Project

The Fit Balkans project is financed by the European Commission (European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) under the ERASMUS-SPORT-2021-SCP call.

The project is a collaborative effort involving several key partners, each bringing unique expertise and resources to the table, with Technische Universität Berlin (TUB), Germany, Goce Delcev University in Stip (UGD), North Macedonia, National Technical University of Athens (NTUA), Greece, Urban Research and Education UG (URE), Germany providing educational materials and supporting the research aspect of the project and Club for Youth Empowerment 018 (KOM 018), Serbia, Asociatia Sportiva Corporate Games (CG), Romania and Fondatsiya Kurazh (Courage Foundation), Bulgaria raising awareness and reaching out to the local communities by implementing the proposed interventions.

The project has a duration of 36 months, starting in 2021. **The Kick-Off meeting** took place on September 22 and 23, 2022 in **Berlin, Germany** after which the research tasks were due, such as the baseline data collection before and after the intervention and the background study.

The project aims to promote physical activity and improve the subjective well-being of young women between the ages of 18 and 30 from six different countries living in five different cities. The project involves women from **Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and North Macedonia**, living in Athens, Plovdiv, Bucharest, Nis and Stip accordingly and it is focused on the following three main objectives:

- To provide research results for physical activity level, eating habits and personal well-being of women from the target group, as a baseline for designing programs for improvement
- Educate women at the age between 18 and 30 on the benefits of physical activity and a healthy and active lifestyle;
- Design interventional programs that will support their well-being and healthy living as well as provide resources for intervention with policy makers.

This project, on the one hand, aims to change the lifestyle of a group of 400 young women in five Balkan countries and on the other hand, measure the positive effects of this lifestyle on their psychological well-being.

- The importance of the well-being of the Balkans women

The young women of the Balkans have traditionally less physical activity compared to the women of Western Europe and their employment rates are less, so this leads to lower levels of physical activity. In 2014, the leisure physical activity of people in countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Croatia was lower than many northern/western countries and the EU average. The best physical activity conditions can be found in Slovenia, the figures of which are still slightly lower than the EU mean. However, this information is considering the entire population. By looking at the gender differences in the case of physical activity, the situation is even more serious.

The share of women who do health-enhancing aerobic and muscle-strengthening as a sort of physical activity is also low in the Balkans compared to the Northern and Western European countries. The studies show a low percentage of women in the Balkans, who practice daily sport as a type of physical activity. These differences between genders in the Balkan countries compared to other European regions have

cultural and historical motives related to the geographic context. Therefore, they are a society group on which we need to focus more.

- The methodological framework of the project

The first and research part of the project included two surveys focusing on the personal and socioeconomics as well as physical activity and well-being of the participants before and after 6 months of intervention in the form of increased walking and/or biking activity in daily life and reducing screen and sedentary time per day of 1000 participants including the 400 active participants. The participants were constantly supported through this period via social media campaigns and personal meetings. These campaigns encouraged young women to change their lifestyles and habits in order to overcome psychological problems and difficulties. Through this approach, we tried to not only attract interested participants to change their habits for six months but also to keep them in the campaign for this time.

The investigation is continued by creating a validated dataset and a statistical analysis, leading to scientific publications and policy reports.

In each country, 100 participants were part of two awareness-raising events organized by the local partners. These included two MOOCs related to two sub-topics of “active mobility and wellbeing” and “active lifestyle for women”.

- Results from the study

Participants in the study were 1220 women at the age between 18 and 30 years old, from five different cities in Greece (Athens), Bulgaria (Plovdiv), Romania (Bucharest), Serbia (Nis) and North Macedonia (Shtip). From the total sample, 135 participants (11%) were from Greece, 92 (7%) were from Bulgaria, 597 (49%) from Romania, 205 (17%) from Serbia and 191 (16%) from North Macedonia.

- **Health/health status:** Half of the respondents perceive their current health status as fair and almost 35% consider that has a good health status. Less than 2% are considered that have poor health status. Serbians perceive their health as good with 83.41% of the Serbian participants replying “Good” or “Very Good”. The highest share of negative perceptions of health is reported in Bulgaria (6.38%).

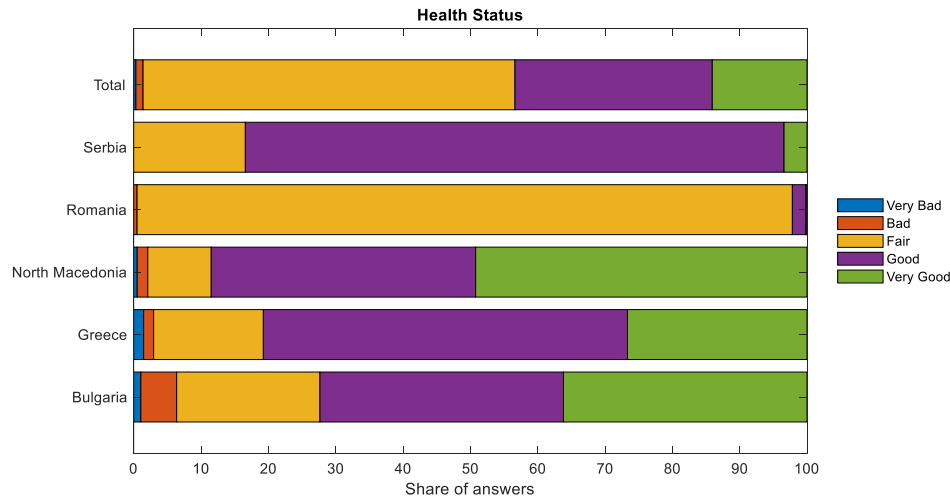


Figure 1. Health Status by Country

- **Transport:** It is observed that car ownership even from a young age is high with over 50% owning a car in all participating countries. One out of two participants own a bicycle and only a few own a scooter or a motorcycle. The lowest bicycle ownership is observed in Greece with 30.37% owning one. followed by Romania with 48,9%. It should be noted that Athens and Bucharest are the two largest participating cities with insufficient cycling infrastructure. For all modes, there is no clear pattern of preference for a specific vehicle in any of the countries.

	Car	Bicycle	Scooter	Motorcycle
Total	71.39	50.34	1.77	3.35
Greece	60.74	30.37	0.00	0.74
Bulgaria	58.51	63.83	8.51	8.51
Romania	68.34	48.91	0.67	1.51
Serbia	100.00	100.00	NaN	NaN
North Macedonia	79.63	55.56	1.85	5.56

Table 1. Share of Ownership

- **Local neighbourhood** areas for cycling: Compared to walking, it can be observed that the replies received are mixed with 53.19% agreeing with the statement. The highest share of positive answers is observed in Bulgaria and the lowest in Greece. The replies to this statement reflect to a certain extent the current condition of cycling infrastructure, if any. For instance, Athens has a fragmented network of cycling lanes, which is also very limited, and this affects people's willingness to cycle. Also, 29% of all respondents agree that there are cycling routes that are separated from the rest of the traffic. As with the previous statement, only Plovdiv seems to have cycling infrastructure segregated from the rest of the traffic.

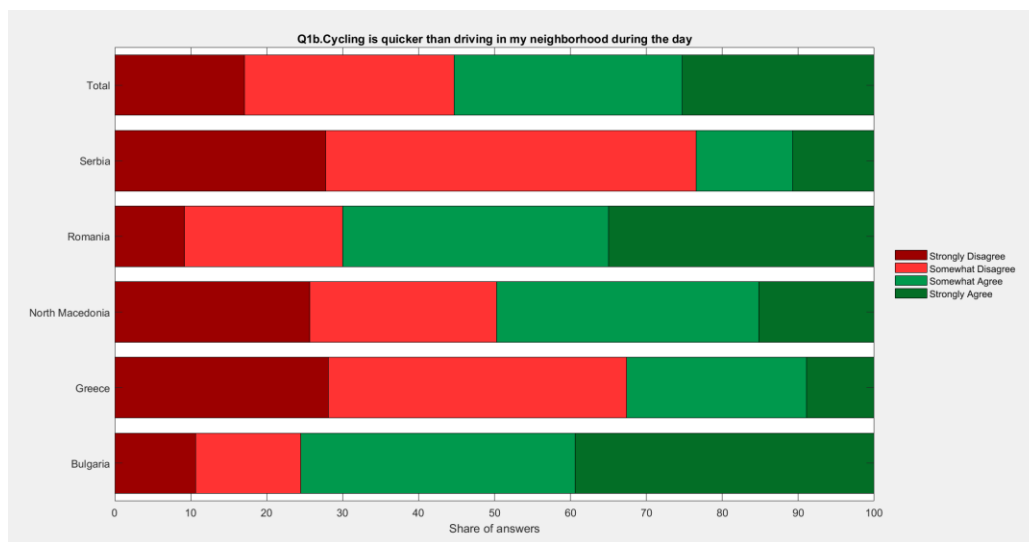


Figure 2. Comparison between cycling and driving

- **Urban greenery:** On average, the respondents believe that there are green areas and decorative trees along the roads of the neighbourhood. The highest share of positive answers can be found in Bulgaria and the lowest in Greece. This can be explained by the limited number of green areas in Athens, which are also not easily accessible by every neighbourhood of Athens. In the other countries, the share of positive answers ranges between 75% and 80%.

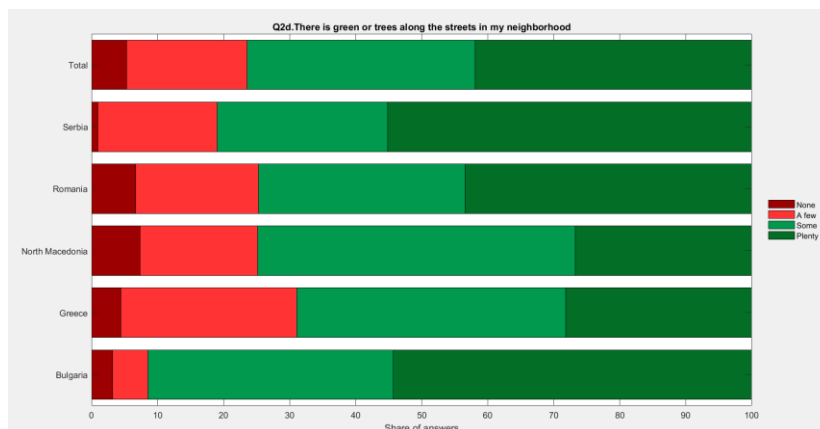


Figure 3. Urban greenery

- **Neighborhood safety:** Specifically, 80% of the respondents believe that there are no safe parking slots for bicycles. In Athens, only 5% believe that they can park safely on their bicycle. The highest share as with the previous statements on bicycles can be found in Bulgaria with 33% of the respondents believing that they can find a safe parking slot for their bicycle. The percentage of positive replies from Romania, Serbia and North Macedonia is around 20%. About, the existence of sufficient number of pedestrian crossings. 57.28% of the respondents believe that there are

enough safe places to cross busy streets. In Serbia and in Greece, the highest share of respondents agrees that that there the number of pedestrian crossings is not sufficient by 54.15% and 57.78% respectively

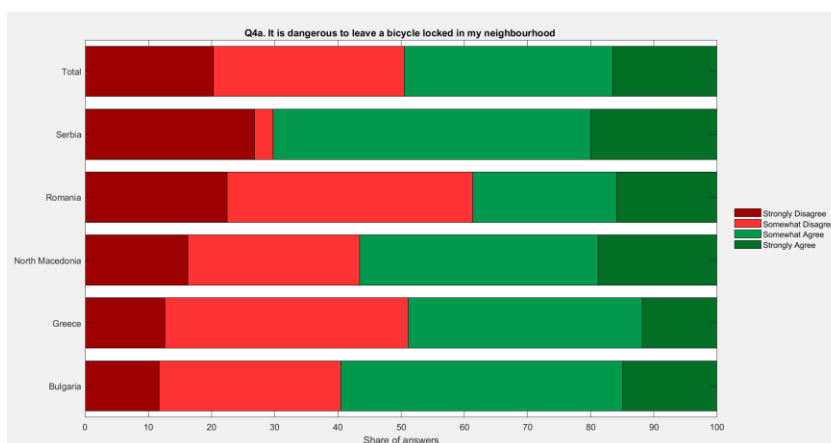


Figure 4. Safety aspects of walking and cycling

Traffic does not increase the danger of walking, according to the results obtained in the participating Balkan cities. Specifically, 68.8% of all respondents disagree with the statement that walking is dangerous because of traffic. Only Serbians consider that traffic is a factor that increases the danger for pedestrians, while in the rest of the countries, approximately one out of four agree with the statement.

- **Level of crime:** In all countries, respondents are extremely confident that it is safe both during the day and during the night. During the day, 90.75% of respondents believe that their neighbourhood is safe during the day, while 77.82% believe that it is also safe during the night. So, the crime rate doesn't seem to affect the respondents in any of the participating countries.

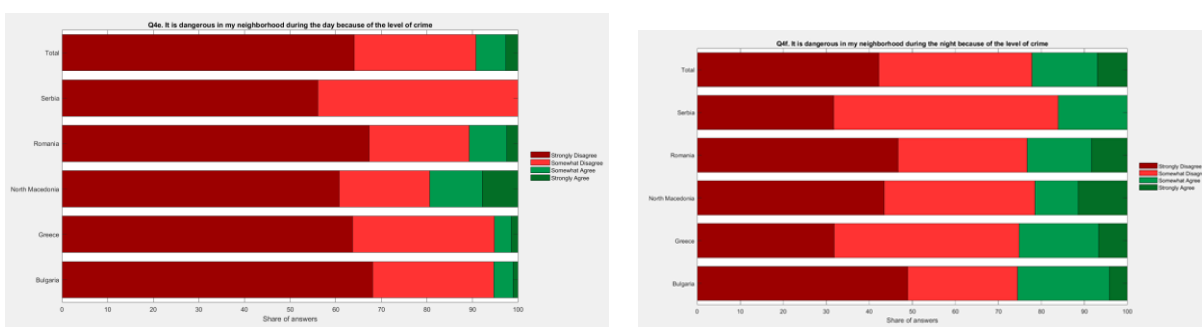


Figure 5. Neighbourhood crime level during the day (a) and night (b)

- **Public transportation:** Overall, the majority of respondents use public transportation every day, but the results vary with the city and the availability of public transport services. For instance, in

Athens and Bucharest which have an extensive public transport network the respondents use more frequently public transport. In smaller cities such as Nis and Shtip the frequency is much lower and there are many respondents that don't use public transport at all.

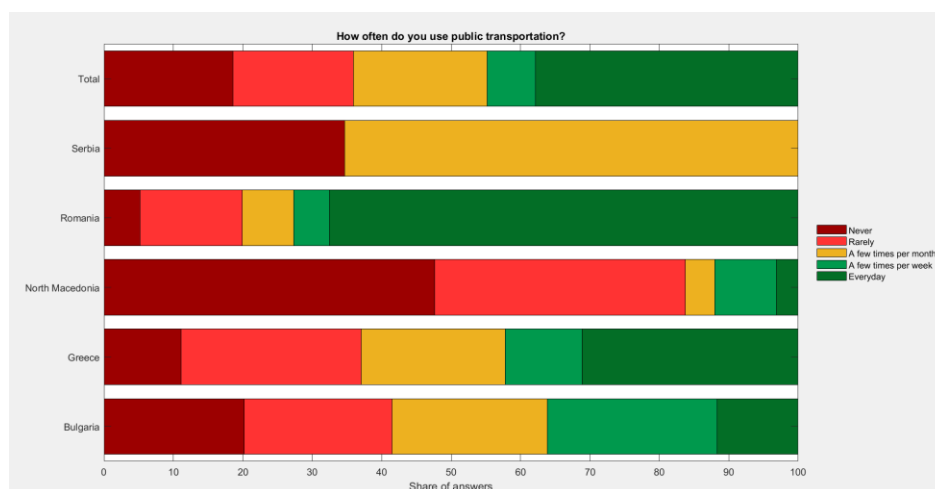


Figure 6. Use of public transport

- Project Highlights

Participation of young women in the Balkans

1220 women between the ages of 18 and 30 years participated in the initial study from which 341 successfully completed the interventions.

Campaigns

The campaigns were designed as a way of intervention towards an active and healthy lifestyle. The intervention level was decided by the participants themselves, and at the beginning of the activation campaign, they filled out a form and promised to adopt one or more of the following tactics:

- intervention in daily mobility behaviour and habits: changing from motorised vehicle use to walking and biking for commute / non-commute urban travels;
- intervention in nutrition;
- reducing sedentary time per day;
- reducing the screen time per day.

Recommendation: These kinds of campaigns can serve as a starting point for motivating women to be more active to improve their overall health and well-being. Institutions such as the Local Government, Universities, NGOs and other relevant policymakers can initiate different activities to intervene in the lives of women, providing guidance and support to help them adopt an active and healthy lifestyle. The goal is to recruit participants and maintain their continued engagement in changing habits.

Project publications

The results of the data collection were gathered in two datasets that were merged into one. This dataset was the basis of all data analyses. The output data was validated in two phases: once by the data collector local partners in Balkans, and once by NTUA and TUB. Then the land use variables were generated using Geographical Information Systems by TUB. This part aimed to quantify the urban form within a catchment area of 600 meters around the homes of the participants. Then all of the data including variables related to families, socioeconomics, body configuration, physical activity, lifestyle and mobility, nutrition, perceptions, and psychological well-being of the participants was used in IBM SPSS for analysis. The drafts of three articles will be provided in:

- the current status of the physical activity of young women and the correlations with urban land use in the Balkans region,
- the role of interventions in urban land use for promoting the physical activity and well-being of young women in the Balkans,
- the role of interventions in young women's physical activity and the influences on their subjective well-being.

Recommendation: New studies, analyses and research papers should be key to any future initiative. Through mutual effort and collaboration, we can achieve great results that can change the current status of the physical activity of young women in the Balkans.

- Recommendations to policymakers

1. Create Safe and Accessible Environments

Gender-Safe Spaces: Many women hesitate to engage in outdoor physical activities due to safety concerns. Policymakers should prioritize developing well-lit, surveilled public spaces, ensuring that parks, walking trails, and sports facilities are free of harassment or violence.

Community Design: Urban planning should focus on creating pedestrian-friendly and bikeable neighborhoods. Include women in urban design consultations to address their specific needs.

Public Infrastructure: Ensure public facilities, such as parks and gyms, are clean, hygienic, and equipped with restrooms, changing areas, and breastfeeding rooms.

Including bicycle parking devices in urban planning and public spaces can encourage cycling, a sustainable and health-promoting form of physical activity.

2. Increase Access to Fitness Programs

Subsidized and Free Programs: Financial barriers often limit women's participation in organized physical activity. Subsidies for gym memberships, free fitness classes in community centers, and scholarships for sports training can encourage participation.

Rural Access: Extend programs to rural areas where recreational facilities may be limited, using mobile gyms or traveling instructors.

Adaptable Programs: Recognize that different life stages (e.g., pregnancy, menopause) require different approaches. Offer prenatal yoga, postnatal fitness, and programs addressing age-related challenges.

3. Promote Education and Awareness

Public Health Campaigns: Collaborate with media outlets to spread awareness about the importance of physical activity in reducing stress, improving mental health, and preventing chronic diseases. Target messaging specifically at women's unique health concerns, such as osteoporosis or postpartum recovery.

Community Ambassadors: Train female community leaders to act as fitness ambassadors, motivating other women to adopt healthy habits.

Workshops: Host workshops to teach women how to integrate physical activity into daily life, including activities that don't require special equipment, such as stretching, dancing, or walking.

4. Enhance Workplace Initiatives

On-Site Fitness: Workplaces should establish on-site gyms, organize exercise breaks, and host regular fitness challenges.

Flexible Hours: Provide policies that allow women to adjust their work hours to fit in exercise or attend wellness programs.

Childcare at Workplaces: Employers can collaborate with fitness centers to offer childcare services during workout hours, eliminating a significant barrier for mothers.

5. Address Barriers to Participation

Cultural Sensitivity: Some cultural or religious beliefs may discourage women from participating in mixed-gender physical activities. Provide women-only sessions in gyms and community centers, and offer attire options that accommodate diverse cultural preferences.

Transportation Access: Provide free or subsidized transportation to gyms, fitness classes, or parks for women living in remote areas. This can be particularly impactful in low-income neighborhoods.

Programs for All Fitness Levels: Design initiatives that cater to beginners as well as advanced participants to ensure inclusivity and sustained participation.

6. Policy Integration and Support

Integration with Schools and Universities: Promote physical activity in schools by requiring sports and fitness classes for girls. Extend these initiatives to universities by providing female-only fitness zones or clubs.

Incentive Schemes: Provide tax benefits or financial incentives to businesses and NGOs that support women's fitness programs or invest in sports infrastructure.

Health System Collaboration: Work with healthcare providers to prescribe physical activity for women, integrating fitness recommendations into routine checkups.

7. Leverage Technology

Digital Fitness Platforms: Partner with developers to create free or affordable fitness apps targeting women's specific health goals, such as improving cardiovascular health, managing stress, or postpartum recovery.

Social Media Campaigns: Use social media platforms to promote physical activity through challenges, testimonials, and success stories of women who have adopted an active lifestyle.

Virtual Communities: Establish online groups or forums where women can share experiences, encourage each other, and receive guidance from experts.

8. Focus on Mental Well-Being

Mind-Body Programs: Offer mindfulness-based programs like yoga, tai chi, and meditation that combine physical activity with mental health benefits.

Counseling Support: Include mental health counseling as part of fitness programs to address issues like body image, stress, or anxiety that might hinder physical activity.

Peer Support Groups: Organize community support groups that promote not just physical health but also emotional well-being, especially for women dealing with postpartum depression or menopause.

9. Encourage Female Representation in Leadership Roles

Role Models: Promote women in sports and fitness leadership roles to inspire participation and break stereotypes.

Policy Advisors: Involve women policymakers, athletes, and community leaders in drafting and implementing fitness policies to ensure inclusivity.

10. Conduct Regular Monitoring and Research

Data Collection: Conduct surveys and studies to understand barriers and enablers of physical activity among women. **Impact Assessment:** Evaluate the effectiveness of programs and policies, adjusting strategies based on feedback.

Long-Term Goals: Establish measurable goals for increasing women's physical activity participation rates and track progress annually.

Implementing these recommendations requires collaboration among governments, NGOs, healthcare providers, businesses, and communities. By addressing women's unique needs and barriers, policymakers can promote physical activity as a cornerstone of women's well-being.

ANNEX

Project meetings

The first intermediate meeting of the project “FIT Balkans” was held in Nis in the period from 18-21.04.2023. Representatives from the Technische Universität Berlin, Ethnicon Metsovion Polytechnion, Urban Research and Education Ug, Fondatsiya Kurazh, Asociatia Sportiva Corporate Games, Klub Za Osnazivanje Mladih 018 Udruzenje and the Goce Delcev University in Shtip had the chance to meet once again and discuss the project upcoming activities.



The second intermediate meeting of the project “FIT Balkans” was held in Plovdiv in the period from 6-8.12.2023 🌈. The project representatives had the chance to meet once again and discuss the project activities accomplished and upcoming activities with a focus on the intervention plan. Representatives of the National Technical University of Athens attended online.



The third meeting was hosted by the Goce Delcev University in Shtip between 21-22 May 2024. The focus of this meeting was the project research papers and preparations for the upcoming online MOOCs.



The fourth meeting was held in Bucharest, Romania from 9 to 12 of October 2024. In this meeting the partners discussed about the finalizations of the intervention, as well as preparing materials for the MOOC 1 and MOOC 2 events that are going to be organized by the consortium.



Other activities

1. In Bulgaria, the Courage Foundation has organised a six month training side by side with professional coaches who will gently facilitate the participants towards making better choices in regards to their sleep schedule, varying their meals and exercising more time and energy efficiently.



FIT-BALKANS

Online Fitness Challenge



**With your team,
collect as many points
as you can in 8 weeks.**

★ **There will be medals
for the top 3 teams!** ★

Webinar: Tuesday, Oct 31st
You'll receive the link via email

Start: Monday, Nov 6th

End: Sunday, Dec 31st

- In North Macedonia the project team from the Goce Delcev University in Shtip organized 6 indoor and outdoor physical interventions. Through these activities they helped the young women in the process of their physical journey offering instructions and structured exercises and most importantly motivation



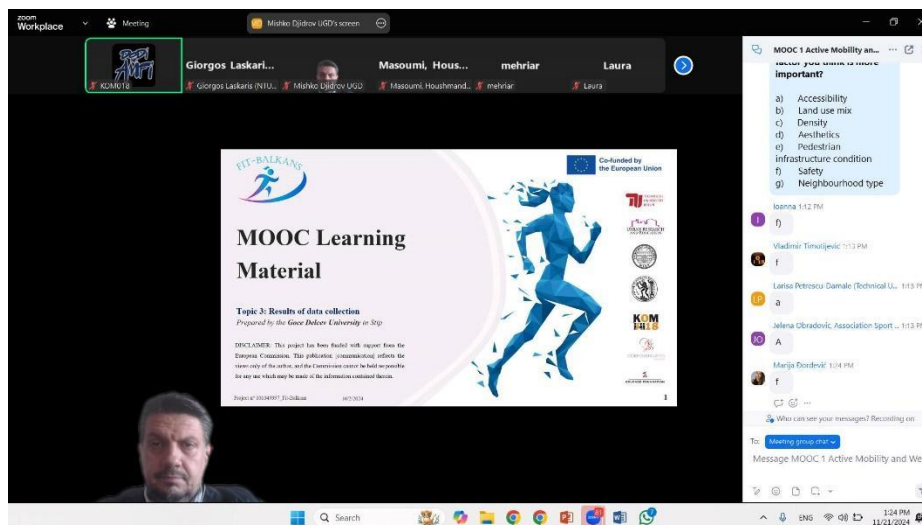
3. Corporate Games Bucharest organized Medals Ceremony for Online FitBalkans Challenge, where they gave medals, diplomas and information for our project FitBalkans!





MOOC's

The first MOOC was organized on 21.11.2024 where more than a hundred participants joined online. This MOOC provided the wider audience with detailed analysis and information gathered during the project, this will be done through interactive presentations hosted by teachers from National Technical University of Athens, Goce Delcev University in Stip and Technische Universität Berlin.



The second MOOC was held on January 30th 2025. The topic was the Women through Healthy Lifestyles where we discussed about practical strategies for adopting sustainable healthy habits, expert-led discussions and interactive assignments.



Guidelines Examples

We prepare learning materials and guidelines to keep participants active but also to stay motivated. The learning materials included practical examples, tutorials and links that can serve as a supporting tool. The structured program was prepared to help them to see progress. This is because these programs are designed with progression in mind. As your body adapts to the demands of the workouts, the program is gradually adjusted to become more challenging, promoting further adaptation and growth.



Exercise instead of driving

Instead of driving, consider walking to the nearby shops.
Try biking to your job once or twice a week.
Walk to the bus stop or train station and use public transport to get to work.
If you take the bus or tram, get off a stop earlier and walk the remaining distance.
Park your car further away from the store entrance and walk instead of parking right in front.
Clean and vacuum your car by yourself rather than going to a car wash.



Exercise at home

Turn up your favorite tunes or the radio and dance around your living room.
Engage in some active playtime with your family or friends.
Take your dog for longer walks, maybe add an extra 10 minutes to your usual route.
Get your hands dirty in the garden by mowing the lawn, raking leaves, or planting some flowers.
Try to add more physical activities to your family time. You could take the kids to the park or play soccer in the backyard.



Exercise in the workplace

Choose the stairs over the elevator or escalator whenever you can.
Consider having your next meeting while walking, or at least standing during it.
Try to spend at least half of your lunch break taking a quick walk, even if it's just for 10 to 15 minutes.
Take a moment to stretch while you're at your desk.
Instead of calling or emailing a coworker, stand up and talk to them in person.
If your job keeps you seated at a desk all day, remember to get up and move around for a few minutes every hour.



Assess your progress six weeks after you start your program (by measuring the same parameters as you did to record your baseline fitness) and then every eight to 12 weeks. You may need to adjust the time, intensity and type of exercise you do to continue improving.
On the other hand, you may be pleasantly surprised to find that you're exercising just the right amount to meet your fitness goals.



If you start to lose motivation, set new goals or try a new activity. Exercising with a friend or taking a class at a local fitness centre may help.



Work from simple to complex - starting easy and gradually increasing skill and loading requirements. 'Repetition without repetition', provides plentiful opportunities for 'failing safely' and developing error-detection abilities, and the ability to coach themselves and each other. This positive feedback loop keeps informing the athlete and coach and enables consistent improvement and success.