

Youth participation and better connections: How to improve the effectiveness of youth democratic representation

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1. Introduction

Youth¹ political involvement is crucial for building active citizens and supporting their development and engagement in politics. However, youth are not participating as much as they should be. This is due to different factors including lack of support from government, which gives advantage to the older and more experienced individuals in politics and creates a lack of interest to be politically active. This lack of participation leads to youth apathy² and brain drain since young people do not find an active role in their societies. Through increased youth political participation and youth representation, it is more likely for the governments to create policies in accordance to the current youth needs. This is why it is important for governments to be held accountable for youth inclusion and participation in political processes.

This article aims to offer different perspectives and attitudes towards youth democratic participation, as well as review best practices of youth inclusion in decision making and advocacy processes. Questions explored in this article include: what is the current perception of parliamentary representation among youth in North Macedonia; what motivates youth to be politically active; and how can the youth-focused work of the young, elected politicians be more effective?

1.1 Forms of Youth Participation

At the national level, there are various forms of youth organizing and participation including: local youth councils, youth associations, national youth councils, youth networks, institutions such as commissions on youth, youth caucuses within parliaments and ministries of youth. These are created in order to jointly represent youth perspectives and to advocate on their behalf in front of the decision makers.³

Besides youth organizing at the national level, regional organizations for youth representation exist as well, such as: the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, the European Youth Forum, and the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe. The main purpose of these local, national, and regional bodies is to ensure that youth perspectives inform processes of policy creation.

1.2 Background of Youth Participation in North Macedonia

Youth in North Macedonia do not believe that the national institutions take into consideration their needs and opinions⁴. There is a weak and strained relationship between youth and the creators of policies that impact them. The situation is more or less similar across the Balkan region, where the main problems concerning youth include poor governance in the education sector and insignificant improvement of the

¹ Different definitions of youth exist world-wide. The term “youth” in this document refers to the individuals below 35, as the widest definition.

² Youth Educational Forum and Westminster, 2019

³ https://jrd.lt/informacija-dirbantiems-su-jaunimu/metodiniai-leidiniai/el-biblioteka/2014_m._everything_you_always_wanted_to_know.pdf

⁴ as a research from the Westminster and Youth Educational Forum 2020 shows

living standard. This poorly prepares youth with skills needed for civic life. Due to this, the social capital of youth in North Macedonia has remained the same for the last 10 years.⁵ This status quo is extremely discouraging for youth and their direct involvement in political processes on a daily basis.⁶ This means that instead of being considered as a priority by the decision makers, youth priorities are discussed as part of other political debates.

Barriers in the political party system and election framework also limit youth participation in the decision-making process. For example, the political parties' candidate lists are another discouraging factor for youth representation within the parliament and government. The younger candidates are usually placed lower on the voting lists, putting them in a disadvantaged position to be elected which discourages them from running in the first place. It has been suggested that youth are "used" by political parties, which include them on candidate's lists to demonstrate diversity, rather than to afford them real representation.⁷

Despite barriers to closed candidate lists limiting youth being elected, the first youth caucus in the national parliament in North Macedonia was founded in 2019. This is an informal body that includes all of the parliamentarians under the age of 35, regardless of their political background. In their first mandate, the youth caucus worked mainly on the creation of the first Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, adopted by the Macedonian Parliament in January 2020.⁸ While the Law was the sole focus of the mandate, the process was inclusive as members of all of the political party youth-wings, youth organizations and the caucus worked together and established consensus on the decisions during the development of the Law.

2. Macedonian Parliamentary Youth Caucus: Current Youth Perceptions

A survey of high school students and youth organizations in the country was conducted to collect insight on youth perceptions and expectations regarding the youth caucus in the National Parliament in North Macedonia. The survey⁹ included 137 participants from high schools and youth organizations from North Macedonia¹⁰ aged 17-30.¹¹ The survey findings clearly indicate challenges facing the youth caucus, but also point out an opportunity for its improvements.

The first half of the questionnaire focused on the knowledge and information youth have on the work of the youth caucus. A high percentage, 67.9%, of the respondents in the survey did not know the caucus existed. Over 80% of the survey respondents never follow the work of the caucus, while 30% answered they never follow the work of the National Parliament. The Parliament's webpage and the news

⁵A study from Youth Educational Forum, 2020, 10 Years Status Quo

https://issuu.com/youtheducationalforum/docs/10yearsstatysquo_-_youth_educational_forum

⁶ A study from Youth Educational Forum: 10 Years Status Quo

⁷ Westminster foundation for Democracy, North Macedonia, 2021

⁸ This was the focus activity of the Youth Caucus in the mandate, since the mandate itself started later (due to later forming of the government (in May 2017) after the elections in December 2016).

⁹ This survey was conducted as part of Stefani Spirovka's Hurford Youth Fellowship from April-May 2021

¹⁰ the cities were Skopje, Kumanovo, Shtip, Resen, Sveti Nikole, Veles, Kavadarci and Bitola

¹¹ Most of the questions in this survey are closed-ended, giving the participants an opportunity to choose to what extent they agreed with particular statements (5 options included, graduating from partially agree to completely disagree, including a neutral - no opinion answer)

(traditional media and their online portals) are main sources of information for those who follow the work of the youth caucus. Only 3.6% of the respondents know how to access the key documents of the youth caucus, and 70% have no opinion on the caucus' strategic documents.

The second half of the questionnaire focused on the youth attitudes towards communication with the national representatives in the youth caucus. Unfortunately, only 38% of the respondents answered they believe they can influence the work of the caucus. About 30% feel encouraged to contact the caucus in order to advocate for their own or their peers' needs. Only 27% believe they could easily contact the members of the caucus, while more than 20% completely or to some extent disagree with the statement¹². Over 50% have no opinion on this.

Unfortunately, only 15% of respondents answered they know how to communicate with the caucus. The respondents suggested open meetings, social media and email communication as top three forms of communication.

This data shows a lack of visibility of the youth caucus which demonstrates that youth do not see the caucus as their voice in parliament. This is understandable because in the previous mandate the caucus worked mainly on the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies. In addition, the caucus's current mandate is working under pandemic conditions. As a result of restrictions, there were limited opportunities for open meetings with stakeholders, direct contact with young people, and promotion of the caucus's work. Engaged youth feel like they can influence the decisions made in the caucus but cannot access the strategic documents, and do not know how to approach the parliamentarians. In order to overcome this, the caucus needs to build relationships with the youth to secure visibility of its work. It is also important to create channels for communications that will encourage the youth to follow its work on a regular basis.

3. International overview: Youth Representation in Parliaments

Youth networks and caucuses in parliaments are growing in number around the world. A study done by Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) found that such bodies exist in 16.7% of the national parliaments.¹³ More than 64% of parliaments covered in the 2021 report had parliamentary committees on youth issues compared to 40% in 2018.¹⁴ Youth caucuses can take different forms such as networks, associations and forums of youth parliamentarians, as well as parliamentary friend groups.¹⁵ People under 45 represent 30.2% of the parliamentarians worldwide, while parliamentarians under 30 represent only 2.6%. This is a low representation since 49% of the global population is under the age of 30.¹⁶ Having a particular number of young Members of Parliament (MP) is not always enough for quality youth representation. The formation of a youth caucus is a guarantee that the young parliamentarians would have a mechanism through which they can influence the youth policies.

¹² "I believe I could easily contact the members of the Youth Caucus"

¹³ Stated at the 2018 report by Inter Parliamentary Union - IPU

<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-12/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2018>

¹⁴ 2018 and 2021 reports by Inter Parliamentary Union - IPU

¹⁵ Youth inclusion within the national parliaments is the highest in the Nordic countries - Research of IPU 2018 - <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-12/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2018>

¹⁶ IPU 2021 - <https://www.ipu.org/youth2021>

About half of the parliamentary bodies representing youth are formal bodies, however function as non-formal structures which influences their productiveness. The less formal approach allows for easier access to advocate and communicate youth perspectives to parliamentarians. At the same time, the parliament is not obliged to form these bodies in every mandate, which affects the continuation of the caucus's work from one parliamentary mandate until the next. The Macedonian youth caucus is also an informal body, under the name: Club on Youth Concerns and Policies. It was established in the previous parliamentary mandate in 2019 and now includes 12 youth parliamentarians under the age of 35 from different political parties. The club was formed following the example of the Club of Women Parliamentarians.

3.1 Best Practices: Securing Youth Parliamentarian Representation

Governments have tried to establish different mechanisms for supporting youth participation. Public pressure and scrutiny, timely and accurate reporting, and civil organizing are some of the examples that youth have used to secure and expand their representation. For instance, in Serbia there is not a specific body in charge of youth concerns within the parliament. However, the civil society organization, ProActive, monitors the work of parliamentarians and evaluates their efficiency and dedication with awards for the best and the worst MPs.¹⁷ ProActive sheds a light on the individual MP's work and their advocacy for youth concerns. In this way ProActive manages to remind the general audience and the parliamentarians how important youth concerns are and the lack of strong advocacy on these issues. This is one way in which they give appreciation to the parliamentarian's progress and create pressure through "public shaming" of the less dedicated parliamentarians.

The Philippines may have found a solution to advance youth participation within parliaments by creating youth lists for all elections. The Philippines mandates that a particular percentage of youth be nominated on these lists so that they are well represented in the policy creation body. This method ensures that youth are not simply included at the bottom of a list where they may not win seats, but ensures that youth are always guaranteed seats.

A recent example of effective youth participation is currently underway in Chile, where the government agreed to revise the constitution following mass demonstrations in October 2019. However, youth and other social groups were not included in this process.¹⁸ Refusing to be left out, the movement "It's Our Turn to Participate" (*Ahora Nos Toca Participar*) formed in 2020. This movement includes consultations with youth, women, elderly, disabled, LGBTI, indigenous peoples, migrants and is contributing to the creation of an inclusive constitution taking everyone into consideration. The case shows how civil society organizing in structures outside institutions, through informal entities that represent youth, can advocate to include their perspectives in decision-making processes. This type of youth organizing is often short-lived because once the objective is fulfilled, the entity dissolves.

The Serbian, Filipino and Chilean experiences are different from the experience in North Macedonia. In North Macedonia the focus is creating mechanisms for youth in policy discussions, not the election system. At the end of the day, in all cases young people found their ways for their perspectives to be heard

¹⁷ <https://proaktiv.org.rs/>

¹⁸ <https://www.movedemocracy.org/a-new-chilean-constitution-built-by-all>

in national parliaments. This demonstrates how some countries create mechanisms to include youth through the election process and others look to include youth in policy development.

North Macedonia can learn from those cases as others are learning from North Macedonian youth participation. The Macedonian example of an informal parliamentary body is currently being replicated in Bosnia, through international cooperation, experience sharing and implementing good parliamentary practices. In both the Macedonian and the Bosnian cases, the process is facilitated by a third party¹⁹ outside of the parliament, supporting the establishment of the club or caucus. In both cases the civil society organizations are encouraging and continuously monitoring the process of establishing the caucuses, and continue to cooperate with the caucuses, offering its expertise, data and experiences.

Youth have many ideas and are eager to participate, and it is necessary to support them in their political engagement. Youth inclusion in political processes creates relationships between youth and the decision makers. In the long run this makes youth feel powerful to influence the policies affecting them, encourages them to be active, lobby and advocate more, which in turn encourages them to remain in their country instead of moving abroad. The examples mentioned above highlight just a few ways countries have attempted to include youth in the decision-making processes. Also, many aspects from the Filipino and Chilean cases could be used as good practices for more effective representation. Below in this paper are recommendations for all countries to consider in order to make more inclusive decision-making processes for youth.

4. Recommendations

The main goals of the recommendations below is to help youth caucuses' work within parliaments in order to ensure its effectiveness and creation of needed policies. From improving communication channels to sharing strategic documents, the recommendations suggested below would secure better connections between the youth, youth organizations and the representatives within the national parliaments. The recommendations are created based on the work of the Macedonian youth caucus but are general and can be implemented by any youth caucus worldwide.

Building Institutional Memory

Transferring institutional memory from one youth caucus mandate to another mandate is crucial for the continuity of its work. The fact that the representatives within the body change, does not mean that the needs of youth also change. This means that parliaments need to document the work of the current mandate of a caucus and support transitional meetings of the representatives between mandates, so that the general direction of the work does not get changed unnecessarily. The institutional memory should include transfer of all of the contacts of youth representatives and organizations that have cooperated with the previous mandate of a caucus.

Transparency of the Work

In order to be focused on particular priorities, youth caucuses must have up-to-date strategic documents that frame the work of the body itself. Only through setting up clear goals can a caucus influence change in the policy creation processes. Besides identifying priorities, these strategic documents are also crucial for communicating with the public. In that manner, creating and following a communications strategy will

¹⁹ NDI Bosnia, NDI Macedonia and Westminster Foundation for Democracy

increase the visibility of the caucuses' works through consistent information sharing. Depending on the audience, this information sharing could be done through traditional and social media.

Media Visibility

Visibility of the caucus's strategic direction and priorities is secured through social and traditional media. This is crucial for informing youth on how they are represented in decision-making policies. The media visibility secures information transfer from the youth caucus towards the general audience. For the youth to understand effectively, parliaments need to use simple language and to be responsive. Once the general audience, including youth, has insight into what is (about to be) the focus of the caucus, it becomes easier to monitor the work, create recommendations and expect particular results in a reasonable timeframe. Both social and traditional media need to be taken into consideration which will bring about wide media coverage of their work. The parliament's website is an official platform where all of the activities, documents and plans related to the work of the caucus should be published and available for public consumption.

Feedback Mechanisms

Channels for communication need to be established and easily available for any young person who wants to address and give feedback to a youth caucus. Different means of communication can cover this need and reach a broader youth audience. For example: the creation of a profile on social media, a functional website, a monthly leaflet containing the focus of the work of this body, as well as publishing the contacts of youth caucus coordinator(s). Since parliamentarians do not have sufficient time to cover all of these activities, appointing a person in charge of the public communication would be a good solution.

Direct Communication with Stakeholders

Communication with National Youth Councils (or other youth representative bodies) is important for youth to feel and be effective, but also for the caucuses to have current information on youth needs and challenges. This could be done through regular meetings, written communications, and networking events. Through official meetings and organizing sessions in the parliament, caucuses can facilitate parliamentary discussions with representatives. Since many of the youth concerns are cross-cutting issues, it would be useful for youth caucuses to organize discussions with representatives from the other parliamentary caucuses.

Rural Youth Networks

Taking into consideration the needs of the rural youth is vital since parliaments struggle to communicate directly with the citizens in rural areas, so youth in these areas are frequently less informed. One way for parliaments to overcome this is to form a network of bodies, organizations and councils that include rural representatives in order to exchange information on a regular basis. Hosting field visits and meetings with them, and even cooperating with the network of youth workers²⁰ is another effective way of inclusive youth parliamentary representation. To reflect nationwide needs, parliaments should include young parliamentarians that equally represent youth throughout the entire country.

Youth Organizations Expertise

²⁰ defined at the Law on youth participation and youth policies, 2020, Parliament of North Macedonia

Civil society can often provide up-to-date information in a timelier manner than government institutions. When it comes to youth needs challenges, youth organizations can play this role and provide current information. More importantly, having a network of youth professionals contributes to the brainstorming processes and increases the quality of the policies. Therefore, it is important for the civic sector to invest in capacity building and developing professionalism, and for the youth parliamentarians to engage the sector whenever they need additional information, perspectives, and opinions.

International Experience Sharing

International experience sharing is valuable for developing youth caucuses or other forms of youth representation. The newly established caucuses will have a chance to learn from good practices and be mentored by their international peers. For this to happen, representatives from youth caucuses need to participate in international networks and follow the regional trends (the European trends in the Macedonian case, as an aspiring EU member). Networking events can help representatives in the caucus create new contacts and meet experts in different fields that could later on be included in lobbying and policy creation processes. These events could also raise the visibility of the work and purposes of the caucuses.

Informal Versus Formal

Converting from an informal to a formal youth institutional body can ensure the continuance in the work of the youth caucus. Currently, the Macedonian youth caucus is an informal body that works on a voluntary basis, in accordance with the individual interests of the parliamentarians. This directly affects the continuation of the caucus work, because without guaranteed participation such as a commission within the parliament the body could easily dissolve. Having a mandatory commission does not guarantee that the youth will be represented simply by having representatives, but by knowing that there is an obligation for the parliament to form such a body, the general public has more basis to react and apply pressure if needed.

Civic Education

Investing in effective educational policies that build active and engaged youth is one of the mechanisms for advancing youth participation and monitoring the work of their representative bodies, among which is the youth caucus. Through educating the youth and introducing them to forms of youth representation, the work of the youth caucus will become more visible and relatable for them. It is important for the educational policies to include both theoretical and practical work on the topic, and to provide skills on policy and politician monitoring as early as possible.

Active Role of the Civil Society Sector

The civil society sector has enough knowledge and expertise to monitor and support the work of the youth caucus. In that regard, through a systematic, analytical and continuous monitoring processes, it can provide publicly available information for the work of the youth caucus. More importantly, through close monitoring of its work, the civil society sector can identify the weak spots of the caucus's work and invest in capacity building of youth parliamentarians. Alongside the media, the civil society sector can publicly pressure for positive changes and influence the work of the youth caucuses.