

POLICY BRIEF

INCREASING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN
POLITICS THROUGH AMENDMENT OF
THE ELECTION CODE:

A ROADMAP FOR INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

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Main objectives of the project:

1. Increasing awareness among young people about electoral processes and their rights as voters.
2. Encouraging youth to engage in policymaking through inclusive and sustainable initiatives.
3. Making recommendations for reforms in the Electoral Code, with the aim of ensuring greater youth representation.

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CONTENT:

POLICY PAPER: "INCREASING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS THROUGH AMENDMENTS OF THE ELECTORAL CODE: A ROADMAP FOR INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY" 5

- The problem with youth participation in politics 5
 - Obstacles to low youth participation in politics..... 5
- Purpose 6**
- Comparative analysis of countries with lowered voting ages and youth quotas in politics 7**
 - Research objective 7
 - Comparative analysis method 7
 - Selection of countries for analysis 7
 - Data collection methods 7
- First proposal: Lowering the voting age to 16 years 8**
 - Examples of countries that have lowered the threshold for acquiring active voting rights 8
 - Austria (2007)..... 8
 - Scotland (2014) 9
 - Brazil (1988)**..... 10
 - Argentina (2012) 11
 - Germany..... 12
- Second proposal: The need to introduce positive discrimination (quotas) for the youth..... 14**
 - Examples of European countries that have youth quotas in political parties 16
 - 1. France** 16
 - 2. Sweden** 16
 - 3. Portugal** 16
 - 4. Romania** 16
 - 5. Greece** 17
 - 6. Norway** 17
 - 7. Germany** 17
- Conclusion 18**
 - How can analysis help us?..... 18
- Recommendations 20**
 - Recommendations for lowering the voting age threshold 20
 - 1. Integrating civic education into formal education 20
 - 2. Pilot projects for lowering the voting age on a local level 20
 - 3. Support for youth political mobilization 20

4. Inclusivity and targeted campaigns.....	20
5. Modernization of the electoral process	21
6. Monitoring and analysis of the results	21
7. Creating a legal framework.....	21
Potential benefits:.....	21
Recommendations for introducing quotas	22
Final point.....	23
Additional activities necessary to overcome the gap or "through youth representation in decision-making to a developed and successful country"	24
A list of institutions, organizations and other entities responsible for implementing the change and how do we expect them to specifically contribute?	31
1. Public institutions	31
2. Civil society organizations.....	32
3. International organizations and donors.....	33
4. Private sector	33
5. Young activists (through informal groups and movements)	34
Six additional proposed initiatives and ideas for collaborations and encouragement of these institutions, organizations and other entities with the aim of their greater involvement in the process of creating change: greater and equitable representation of young people in decision-making processes at central and local levels	35
1. Formation of a National Youth Platform.....	35
2. Mentoring and support programs.....	35
3. Local Youth Councils – completing the legal obligation.....	36
4. Youth budget initiatives	36
5. Youth Accelerator for Ideas	36
6. Public discussions and round tables.....	37
Implementation timeline:	38
CONCLUSION:.....	39
Why is it necessary to bridge the gap and achieve greater participation, i.e. equitable representation of the youth in policy-making and decision-making?	39
Useful links:.....	41

POLICY PAPER: "INCREASING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS THROUGH AMENDMENTS OF THE ELECTORAL CODE: A ROADMAP FOR INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY"

I.

THE PROBLEM WITH YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

Obstacles to low youth participation in politics

The low participation of young people in politics is a complex problem that arises from multiple factors, such as: social, economic, educational and cultural barriers. In Macedonia, as in many other countries, these challenges create a cycle of political apathy and insufficient representation of young people. The following key obstacles can be detected: distrust in the political system, insufficient political education, political culture and stereotypes, lack of opportunities for participation.

Young people often express *distrust of political institutions and processes*, which they perceive as corrupt, ineffective, or inadequate to address their problems. In Macedonia, this is particularly pronounced due to historical and ongoing political crises that foster a sense that the voice of young people is not important or influential.

In many education systems, including the Macedonian one, *civic and political education is underrepresented or inadequately implemented*. Young people do not receive the necessary information about their role as citizens nor about how to engage in political processes, which makes them insecure and uninterested in political engagement.

The political culture in many countries places young people in a passive role, considering politics to be "too serious" or "too early" for them. This stereotype is compounded by a lack of role models for young political leaders, which further demotivates this group.

Economic insecurity, unemployment, and lack of opportunities force young people to focus on existential problems rather than political issues. This is particularly problematic in countries such as Macedonia, where many young people consider emigration as a solution to their problems.

PURPOSE

The political document aims to address the problem of insufficient involvement of young people in political processes, which represents a significant challenge for democratic societies. Despite the fact that young people constitute a significant part of the population, their participation in decision-making processes is very limited. This mismatch not only undermines the basis of inclusive democracy, but also carries serious long-term consequences for the development of societies.

The aim of this document is to identify specific measures and recommendations that will create the preconditions for greater youth involvement in politics. By analyzing the existing barriers, such as lack of access to information, limited political education, stereotypes about youth and institutional obstacles, the document proposes strategies for overcoming them.

The main goal is to promote the creation of policies that will recognize young people as equal partners in political processes. This means improving young people's access to decision-making positions, providing platforms for their participation, and building mechanisms to encourage their engagement.

In the long term, the document aims to contribute to the creation of policies that will reflect the needs and perspectives of young people, thereby enabling the resolution of priority issues such as quality education, reducing unemployment, climate and technological development. Only through the integration of young people in political processes can societies ensure sustainable development and democratic stability.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COUNTRIES WITH LOWERED VOTING AGES AND YOUTH QUOTAS IN POLITICS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this study is to identify and analyze the experiences of countries that have lowered the voting age and/or introduced quotas for the youth in political institutions. The research seeks to determine good practices and the impact of these measures on youth political participation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS METHOD

Comparative analysis is applied as a basic method for comparing political and legislative frameworks, as well as the effects of the implementation of measures in different countries.

SELECTION OF COUNTRIES FOR ANALYSIS

The countries were selected based on the following criteria:

- The application of a lowered voting age (16 or 17 years).
- The presence of legal provisions for youth quotas in politics.
- Different degree of economic, socio-cultural and political development to ensure diversity.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

- Document analysis: Review of legislative acts, strategies and policy reports related to the youth and their political involvement.
- Literature review: Study of academic papers and reports from international organizations such as UNDP or the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

FIRST PROPOSAL: LOWERING THE VOTING AGE TO 16 YEARS

Lowering the voting age to 16 is a topic that is gaining increasing attention around the world as part of the efforts to increase youth participation in democracy. Here are a few examples of countries where this measure has already been introduced or where its implementation is being actively considered.

EXAMPLES OF COUNTRIES THAT HAVE LOWERED THE THRESHOLD FOR ACQUIRING ACTIVE VOTING RIGHTS

Austria (2007)

In 2007, Austria became the first country in the European Union who as part of a wider reform package, lowered the voting age to 16 for all elections – local, national and European¹. This measure was motivated by a desire to increase political awareness and youth participation. The reason for this change was the belief that young people were mature enough to participate in democratic processes. Research shows that voter turnout among young people in Austria is comparable to or higher than that of older age groups.

Helmut Wintersberger (2016)² in his study of the 2007 Austrian electoral reform, which lowered the voting age to 16, believes that the lowering of the voting age contributed to an increased turnout of young voters in elections. His research showed that young voters aged 16 and 17 are equally, if not more, informed and engaged compared to older voters. This is supported by the fact that the political decisions of young people were carefully considered, contrary to skepticism about their maturity. The author further emphasizes in his study the role of the education system as crucial in ensuring politically literate and informed young people. He identifies political education in schools as the (most) important factor for the successful implementation of the reform.

The long-term effects of the reform include: the creation of a new generation of voters, greater political awareness among young people, increased trust in institutions, diversity in the political landscape, etc. The lowering of the voting age to 16 in Austria encouraged the early involvement of young people in the democratic process. This resulted in a generation that is more likely to develop lasting habits of participation in elections. The reform stimulated interest in political topics as early as the teenage years. This enabled the creation of politically aware young citizens, who are able to make informed decisions and understand the complexity of political systems. Young voters who participated in the elections expressed greater trust in democratic institutions because they felt that their voice was valued and had an impact. The

¹Wintersberger, Helmut. (2016). Voting Age 16 - The Austrian Electoral Reform 2007.

²Wagner, M., Johann, D., & Kritzinger, S. (2012). *Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice*. Electoral Studies, 31(2), 372–383.

involvement of younger voters brought a new dynamic to political discussions, opening up issues that are particularly relevant to young people such as education, climate change and digitalization.

Although the reform is considered successful, it has been shown that there is a need for constant updating of political education programs to ensure that all young people receive sufficient information and skills for active participation.

Scotland (2014)

In the 2014 independence referendum, young people aged 16 and 17 were eligible to vote, resulting in high turnout and engagement. Eichhorn (2014)³ in his study of youth participation in the Scottish independence referendum argues that lowering the voting age to 16 stimulated significant political mobilization among young people.

In his study, he points out that, young voters aged 16 and 17 showed a high level of political awareness and active participation in public debate. The research showed that young voters not only turned out to vote in high percentages, but also made informed decisions. The inclusion of young people in the referendum refuted the argument that younger voters lacked sufficient political maturity. According to the author, the education system played a key role in preparing young people for their new political role. Schools and teachers actively encouraged students to debate the referendum and research relevant information.

Although the study is mostly positive, Eichhorn points out that it is necessary to ensure continued support through educational and social institutions for young people to stay engaged and informed. He recommends better monitoring of the long-term effects of voting at 16 on political engagement.

Voting at 16 has fostered a sense of political responsibility among young people, which has a long-term effect on their political engagement and trust in the democratic system. This involvement at an early age can create a generation with greater political participation and civic awareness.

The successful implementation prompted the Scottish Parliament to lower the voting age for local and parliamentary elections to 16.⁴ Young voters have shown a strong interest in issues that directly affect them, such as the environment, education and the future of Scotland.

³Eichhorn, J. (2014). *Voting at 16 in the Scottish Independence Referendum: Lessons for the future of youth political engagement*.

⁴Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015, available at < <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2015/7/enacted/data.pdf> >, accessed 24. 11.2024.

The successful implementation of voting at 16 in Scotland serves as a positive example for other countries considering similar reforms. The involvement of young people at this level has shown that they are an important part of the democratic process and that their voice can have meaning.

Brazil (1988)

Brazil introduced the right to vote for 16-year-olds as part of the 1988 Constitution, which was adopted after the end of the military dictatorship (1964–1985). This Constitution laid the foundation for democratic governance and the inclusion of all age groups in the political process. The decision was motivated by the desire for democratization and the inclusion of young people after the dictatorship. Another reason was the fact that in Brazil, at the age of 16, young people can start working and pay taxes. This was considered to be mature enough to participate in the electoral process. Young people in Brazil have a long history of participation in social and political movements, such as the "Diretas Já!" movement in the 1980s, which called for direct elections.⁵

In accordance with Article 14 of the Constitution⁶:

- Voting is voluntary for young people aged 16 and 17 and for people over 70.
- Voting is mandatory for all citizens aged 18 to 70.

With more than 2 million registered voters aged 16 and 17, young people represent a significant group in the electoral process and thus represent a significant political factor.

Statistics⁷ show that young people actively participate in elections, especially in regions where political culture is strong. Brazil is among the countries that invest the most in civic education through the school system, which helps young people understand the importance of voting⁸.

On the other hand, the National Electoral Commission (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral – TSE) actively implements political education programs for young people. Recently, it has been actively working to promote inclusion and political participation, especially of minorities, with the aim of consolidating and strengthening democracy and institutions in Brazil. Through frequent contacts with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), which began with a visit to IFES headquarters in October 2020, these initiatives have evolved into the joint

⁵Ribeiro, EG (2013). *Youth and Voting: Brazil's Experience of Voting at 16* .

⁶The Constitution of Brazil is available at <

https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm >, accessed on 24. 11.2024.

⁷Statistical data are available on the website of the National Electoral Commission <

<https://international.tse.jus.br/en/elections/statistics> >, accessed on 24. 11. 2024

⁸Almeida, C., & Silva, P. (2018). *Political Socialization and Electoral Engagement of Young Brazilians* .

preparation of two conceptual documents, titled “Combating online and offline violence against women in public life in Brazil” and “Enabling Brazilian youth to participate in democratic processes”. The second document aims to increase the participation of young Brazilians in political and electoral processes through the development of an online course on the concepts of politics and democracy, as well as teacher training.⁹

Research shows that voter turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds is stable, although slightly lower than in older age groups. Youth voter registration campaigns regularly increase political mobilization. Political parties and candidates often use youth campaigns to encourage support from this demographic group.¹⁰

Argentina (2012)

In 2012, Argentina passed a law¹¹ on voluntary voting for 16- and 17-year-olds. The government justified this decision by arguing that young people already have obligations (for example, paying taxes) and therefore should have the right to vote.

According to Tedesco¹², the 2012 reform, which lowered the voting age to 16, is a great example of encouraging youth participation in politics. This reform did not only mobilize young voters, but also redefined the way the political system perceives the youth population.

Young people aged 16 and 17 were given the opportunity to participate in elections for the first time, on a voluntary basis. Their reaction was impressive: a large number of young voters decided to exercise their right to vote, expressing a sense of responsibility and awareness of their role in democratic processes.

This step brought significant changes in the political landscape. Political parties and candidates began to focus their campaigns on youth issues, such as education, digital rights, and employment opportunities. This led to the creation of a political agenda that more closely reflects the needs and interests of young generations.

The success of the reform was partly due to the support of the families and the education system. Schools played a key role in preparing young people for this new role by encouraging discussions about politics and democracy. In addition, political education and socialization through the families created an environment where young people felt encouraged to be active and informed.

⁹More information can be found at < <https://international.tse.jus.br/en/affirmative-actions/empowering-brazilian-youth-to-participate-in-democratic-processes> >, accessed on 24. 11. 2024 Mr.

¹⁰Singer, A. (2014). *Democracy and Youth Participation in Brazil: A Socioeconomic Perspective*

¹¹Law 26,774, known as *the Youth Voting Law* (2012).

¹²Tedesco, L. (2014). *Youth Electoral Participation in Latin America: The Case of Argentina*.

As a long-term effect, the reform fostered the creation of a generation with increased political awareness and trust in institutions. This confirmed the thesis that young people, when given the opportunity, can be constructive participants in the democratic process.

Argentina's experience shows that promoting youth participation requires more than just legislative changes. It requires a long-term strategy that supports this engagement through education, digital communication, and youth inclusion in decision-making processes. Argentina is demonstrating the potential of young people as drivers of democracy, setting an example that other countries can follow.

Germany

In some German states, young people can already vote in local elections at the age of 16. In recent years, there has been a debate about expanding this possibility to the national level.

Schiller and Bernd's study¹³ analyzes youth voting rights in Germany, focusing on the differences between the federal and local levels, as well as the impact of youth voting on the political system. In the context of our analysis of lowering of the voting age, this study can offer relevant parallels and important lessons.

In Germany, young people from the age of 16 have the right to vote in local elections in several federal states (e.g. Bremen, Hamburg, Saxony). On a federal level, the minimum voting age remains 18. This dual level creates different experiences for young people depending on where they live and it raises the question of the need for a unified approach.

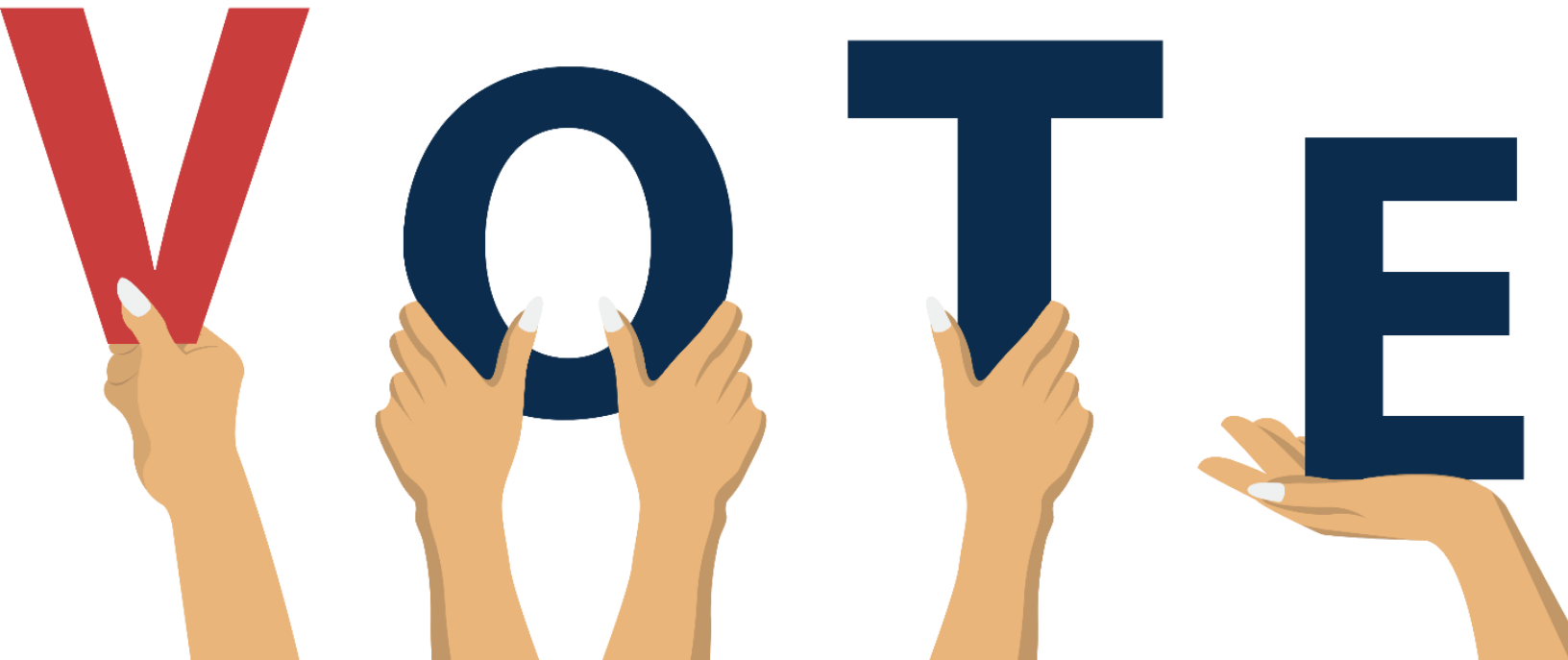
Research shows that young voters aged 16 and 17 have a participation rate similar to older age groups, especially if there are appropriate mechanisms for political education and mobilization.

Local elections often focus on issues that directly affect young people (e.g., schools, public transportation, cultural initiatives), which further motivates them.

In this study, the political education through schools is also identified as a key factor for the successful integration of young people into the electoral process. Germany has systematic civic education programs that contribute to political literacy and voting readiness.

¹³Schiller, T., & Bernd, P. (2018). Youth Voting Rights in Germany: Federal and Local Perspectives.

The study recommends considering the possibility of lowering the voting age at a federal level to achieve consistency and increase the political mobilization of youth.



SECOND PROPOSAL: THE NEED TO INTRODUCE POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION (QUOTAS) FOR THE YOUTH

Quotas for youth participation in politics are a form of positive discrimination that aims to ensure greater representation of young people in decision-making processes. They are a necessary instrument for correcting structural inequalities that prevent the active participation of young people and for ensuring their voice in politics.

Positive discrimination, such as the introduction of quotas, is justified in cases where: there is historical or structural inequality, the goal is greater fairness, not privilege, and it has a long-term effect on cultural and structural change.

Young people, as well as women or minorities, often face deep-rooted barriers that prevent them from equal participation. Quotas are a temporary measure to overcome these barriers.

Quotas are not about giving an "unfair advantage," but about ensuring a level playing field. They create opportunities for young people who would otherwise be marginalized.

The presence of youth in political structures can initiate changes that will lead to lasting inclusion and eliminate the need for quotas in the future.

The main benefits of introducing quotas would be correcting generational imbalance, increasing political inclusiveness, improving political culture, representing specific youth interests, and overcoming barriers for participation.

In many political systems, especially in countries such as Macedonia, political processes are dominated by older generations. This leads to the neglect of the priorities and perspectives of the youth, who are excluded from decision-making. Quotas are a mechanism that addresses this imbalance, ensuring a place for young people in institutions.

Quotas pave the way for the inclusion of young people from different social, economic and ethnic groups, which is crucial for the democratization of society. Inclusive political processes make institutions more resilient and closer to all citizens.

When young people are involved in political processes, they bring innovative ideas, new perspectives, and fresh energy. This can help break down stereotypes of young people as "inexperienced" or "unprepared" for decision-making.

Quotas ensure that key issues for young people, such as education, digital skills, climate change and access to jobs, are priorities on the political agenda.

In situations where systemic barriers exist (economic, social, cultural), quotas create a guaranteed place for young people. This reduces the risk of exclusion and motivates young people to get involved.

Introducing quotas for young people in politics is an effective mechanism for increasing their participation in decision-making processes and for improving youth representation in political institutions. There are three basic models of youth quotas:

1. Reserved seats in parliaments for the youth

This model provides a certain number of seats in the parliament that are reserved exclusively for young people. This measure ensures that young people will have their own representatives in the legislature and will be able to directly influence decision-making processes. This practice is used in countries such as Rwanda, where seats are reserved for young representatives in parliament.

2. Legally determined quotas for candidates

In this case, political parties are legally obliged to nominate a certain percentage of young people as their candidates, usually on party lists for elections. The aim is to ensure that parties actively include young people and enable them to run for positions at the local, national or regional level.

These quotas are part of the electoral law in some countries, such as Tunisia, where it is stipulated that a minimum of 25% of candidates on electoral lists must be young people.

3. Voluntary quotas for political parties

Political parties can introduce voluntary quotas for young people in their ranks, although they are not legally obliged to do so. This measure is based on the party's internal policy and its commitment to increased youth participation. Examples of this type of quota can be found in political parties in Sweden and Norway, where the youth wings of the parties are active and work to ensure the representation of young people on election lists. In Sweden, several political parties have adopted a goal of ensuring that at least 25% of their candidates are under the age of 35. The result is an above-average level of representation of MPs under 30 (6.6%) and under 40 (28.9%).

These quota models represent important steps towards encouraging young people to engage in political life and decision-making processes. At the same time, they contribute to ensuring a balanced and fair representation of different age groups in political institutions.¹⁴

¹⁴Inter-parliamentary Union. (2023). *Youth participation in national parliaments: 2023*. Inter-Parliamentary Union., p. 39
< <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2023/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments> >, accessed on 16. 12. 2024.

EXAMPLES OF EUROPEAN COUNTRIES THAT HAVE YOUTH QUOTAS IN POLITICAL PARTIES

1. France¹⁵

France is one of the leaders in involving young people in politics. Although France has binding quotas for gender equality (to increase women's participation in politics), recent reforms have included young people. France has launched initiatives to include young candidates up to 35 years old on electoral lists, although this does not qualify as a classic quota. This is done in order to stimulate political parties to include young people in their ranks, while ensuring generational renewal in politics and attracting new, young voters.

2. Sweden¹⁶

Sweden is known for its progressive policies for youth inclusion. The system of subsidies and support for political parties that strive to include young people on their electoral lists is key. Unlike France, Sweden does not have strictly binding quotas, but encourages political parties to embrace youth inclusion through financial incentives. Parties that include candidates under the age of 35 receive greater subsidies and support from the state, which increases the motivation for political inclusion.

3. Portugal¹⁷

Portugal has a strategy which involves young people in politics by encouraging political parties to nominate candidates under the age of 35. It is believed that young people should have a greater influence on political processes, so political parties receive financial support from the state if they include young people as candidates on their electoral lists. This is a specific form of indirect quota, which aims to increase youth representation.

4. Romania¹⁸

In Romania, young people are encouraged to participate in politics through informal quotas. Political parties are encouraged to include young people on electoral lists, although no strict

¹⁵**Besson, L. (2020).** *Youth and politics in France: A study of recent reforms and their impact on political party dynamics*. Journal of European Politics, 35(2), 234-250.

¹⁶**Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2021).** *Youth participation in national parliaments: Country case studies, including Sweden*. Inter-parliamentary Union.

¹⁷**Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2021).** *Youth participation in national parliaments: The case of Portugal*. Inter-parliamentary Union.

¹⁸**Stoica, M. (2020).** *Youth and political inclusion in Romania: An analysis of informal quotas and financial incentives*. Journal of Eastern European Politics, 42(1), 58-74.

quotas are set. Although Romania does not have mandatory quotas, there are initiatives to include young people and ensure that politics is representative of all age groups. Subsidies and other forms of support are also offered to parties that demonstrate a commitment to youth inclusion.

5. Greece¹⁹

Greece does not have a binding youth quota, but it does have incentive policies. Although political parties are not required to field candidates under the age of 35, they are encouraged to do so in order to attract more young voters. Other forms of support for political parties that include young people in their ranks are sometimes used. This is part of a broader strategy to modernize political parties and facilitate easier access to politics for young people.

6. Norway²⁰

In Norway, young politicians achieve a high level of participation thanks to policies that promote *quotas for people under 30*. This is achieved by introducing the following policies: a lowered age limit for candidacy, where the law allows people over 18 to stand for local elections, which motivates young people to get involved in politics from an early age. Then there is *financial support for young people* who receive funding for training and campaigns, as well as *promotion through youth forums*, where political parties organize youth conferences and *where young people have the opportunity to present their ideas*.²¹

7. Germany

Germany has policies that include introducing *youth quotas in parties*. Parties have informal quotas that ensure that young candidates are included on election lists. Another policy is *funding youth candidates*, where financial and logistical support is offered to young people who are running for the first time.²² Finally, there are *political mentorships*, where young candidates are given mentors in parties, who guide them through the process of creating campaigns and public appearances.²³

¹⁹Papadopoulos, E. (2020). *Youth inclusion in Greek politics: A critical analysis of the political parties' strategies and incentives*. *Journal of Mediterranean Politics*, 26(3), 210-225.

²⁰Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. (2022). *Youth participation in politics in Norway: Reforms, quotas, and incentives*. Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. < <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/kmd/id200/>>, accessed 16.12. 2024

²¹Sund, E. & Hansen, L. (2020). *Youth inclusion and political reforms in Norway: The role of quotas, financial support, and youth forums*. *Journal of Scandinavian Politics*, 38(2), 123-140.

²²Fischer, L., & Müller, K. (2021). *Youth inclusion and political mentoring: Policies and practices in Germany*. *Journal of European Politics*, 40(1), 102-118.

²³Berman, A., & Schmidt, D. (2020). *Political mentorship and youth engagement in Germany: A policy analysis*. *Journal of Political Engagement*, 28(3), 225-239.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of examples from Austria, Scotland, Brazil, Argentina and Germany shows that lowering the voting age to 16 can bring positive changes in political culture and youth participation in democratic processes. These countries demonstrate that when young people are involved in voting they show high levels of political awareness, maturity and engagement. In most cases, youth voter turnout is similar to or higher than that of older age groups, especially when supported by appropriate civic education programs.

The key factor for success in these examples is the significant role of the education system. In Austria and Scotland, schools actively encourage young people to participate in political debates and elections, ensuring political literacy from an early age. Similarly, in Brazil and Argentina, political education institutions and active campaigns to register young voters are creating a generation that is ready to participate and contribute to the democratic process. These countries show that involving young people in voting does not only increase their trust in institutions, but it also encourages the creation of a political agenda that suits their priorities, such as education, the environment and digitalization.

HOW CAN ANALYSIS HELP US?

In the Macedonian context, the analysis offers several important lessons for encouraging greater youth participation in politics:

- **Lowering the voting age**

Introducing the right to vote for 16 and 17-year-olds could encourage early political mobilization. As examples show, young people who vote at this age develop long-term democratic habits and become consistently engaged citizens.

- **Improving political education**

Civic education programs in schools should be strengthened to prepare young people for their role as active participants in politics. They should include topics such as understanding the electoral process, the rights and responsibilities of voters, and the importance of participating in elections.

- **Political mobilization campaigns**

Introducing campaigns to register and inform young people about their rights and opportunities is key to increasing political participation. Such campaigns should be designed with the participation of young people and to use digital channels that are popular among them.

- **Focusing on youth priorities**

Political parties and institutions should include issues that affect young people, such as education, jobs, and the environment in their programs. This could increase young people's interest in politics and create a sense that their voice matters.

- **Institutional support**

Youth advisory bodies should be established on local and national levels, which will provide a platform for direct participation of young people in decision-making processes.



RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOWERING THE VOTING AGE THRESHOLD

Lowering the voting age could be a significant step towards increasing youth participation in the political process, but in order for it to be successful appropriate conditions need to be provided. Based on the experiences of Austria, Scotland, Brazil, Argentina and Germany, recommendations to policymakers in Macedonia could be as follows:

1. Integrating civic education into formal education

- Introducing or strengthening civic education programs in high schools, with an emphasis on democracy, the political system, the electoral process, and the importance of voting.
- Training teachers to use innovative approaches that will encourage debate, critical thinking, and interest in political issues among young people.

2. Pilot projects for lowering the voting age on a local level

- Start piloting voting at the age of 16 in local elections or within youth councils. This will allow for gradual adaptation of the system and collection of data on the impact of this reform.

3. Support for youth political mobilization

- Organizing informative campaigns to raise awareness among the youth about their role in democratic processes.
- Support for youth organizations, school debates and projects that encourage youth participation in the creation of public politics.

4. Inclusivity and targeted campaigns

- Political parties and institutions need to develop messages and platforms that are relevant to the youth (education, climate change, digitalization, and young entrepreneurs).
- Organizing discussions and workshops in local communities where young people can participate in open dialogues with policy-makers.

5. Modernization of the electoral process

- Introducing voter registration technologies and online education which will ease political engagement among the youth.
- Ensuring transparency and inclusivity of the electoral process to build trust among young people.

6. Monitoring and analysis of the results

- Conducting research and analysis on the impact of lowering the voting age on the voter turnout and political literacy.
- Establishing an expert group that will monitor and evaluate the long-term effects of the reforms.

7. Creating a legal framework

- Drafting a bill to lower the voting age, based on international examples and best practices.
- Organizing consultations with youth organizations, academics, and civil society before the law is adopted.

Potential benefits:

- **Increased political awareness and participation:** Young people who start voting earlier show a higher likelihood of long-term participation in elections.
- **More inclusive democracy:** Voting at 16 integrates young people into decision-making processes, making them partners in democratic change.
- **Motivated institutions:** The presence of young voters will encourage institutions and parties to address their needs.

These recommendations are based on proven practices and can be adapted to local contexts and capacities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTRODUCING QUOTAS

⇒ **Legal implementation of youth quotas**

Adopting legislative measures that guarantee a minimum percentage of youth representation in parliaments and other decision-making levels. These quotas should be clearly defined and integrated into electoral laws.

⇒ **Lower age limits for candidacy**

Lowering the minimum age for running for public office to ensure that young people have the opportunity to participate in the political process on an equal basis.

⇒ **Ensuring a transparent nomination process**

Political parties should introduce transparent processes for nominating young candidates, which will encourage and support young people to participate in politics.

⇒ **Positive discrimination for youth candidates**

Applying positive discrimination to support young people through financial assistance for campaigns, media support, or leadership training, so that they can successfully compete with older and more experienced candidates.

⇒ **Creating youth parliamentary bodies**

Establishing permanent youth committees or forums within parliaments that will ensure the visibility and influence of young people in decision-making processes.

⇒ **Raising public awareness about the importance of youth participation**

Organizing awareness-raising campaigns about the benefits of youth participation in politics that will encourage voters to support young candidates.

⇒ **Monitoring and assessing the effects of quotas**

Introducing mechanisms for regular monitoring and assessment of the effectiveness of youth quotas in order to improve their implementation and results.

⇒ **International cooperation and sharing of good practices**

Exchange of experiences and good practices with countries that have successfully implemented youth quotas to advance domestic policies.



Final point

The implementation of these practices could lead to stronger political engagement of young people in Macedonia. They would feel like an important part of the democratic process, which could contribute to better representativeness, increased trust in institutions, and the creation of a generation with lasting political awareness and responsibility.

II.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES NECESSARY TO OVERCOME THE GAP OR "THROUGH YOUTH REPRESENTATION IN DECISION-MAKING TO A DEVELOPED AND SUCCESSFUL COUNTRY"

What are the statistical data on the position of young people in the Republic of North Macedonia?

Young people represent a significant part of the country's demographic structure, according to the latest official statistical document²⁴. They are 17.8% of the population (aged 15 to 29). However, their political representation remains far below proportional levels, which creates a gap in decision-making processes and constraints in the creation of policies that express their needs and perspectives.

Analyses²⁵ show that young people are minimally represented in North Macedonia's politics. Only 3.6% (3 out of 120) of MPs are under the age of 30, and on a local level their representation is even lower. These figures reflect a broader trend in the Western Balkans, where structural and cultural barriers deter young people from actively participating in political life. As a result, their voices often remain underrepresented.

In accordance with the confirmed lists of the SEC, a total of 1677 confirmed candidates participated in the 2024 Parliamentary Elections²⁶, representing a total of 17 political entities (political parties and coalitions), distributed in six electoral districts. The average age of all candidates is 46.52 years. Young candidates (18-29 years) make up 14.6% of the total number of candidates. The expanded age category of young candidates for MPs (18-39 years) cumulatively amounts to 35.5%.

The Youth Alliance - Krushevo points out that according to their analysis²⁷, there is a continuous decline in the participation of young people in politics. According to their data, only 25 out of 84 municipalities in the country have a functioning Local Youth Council (LYC). We have no ministers or deputy ministers, and only one mayor belongs to the category of young people, which makes young people excluded from decision-making processes. It is not only important

²⁴Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of North Macedonia 2021 - first set of data, State Statistical Office (SSO), 2022

²⁵Analysis of data from the 2021 Population, Household and Housing Census relating to youth, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023

²⁶Analysis of the position of young people in the 2024 Parliamentary Elections, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2024

²⁷Analysis "Society with Excluded Youth", Youth Alliance - Krushevo, 2023

that young people are asked, but it is also important that they are direct decision-makers," states the Analysis "Society with Excluded Youth" of the Youth Alliance - Krushevo.

As a positive example that shows continuous results is the Club for Youth Issues and Policies at the Parliament, which was established in 2017. The Club is an informal body, composed of young MPs up to the age of 35 and MPs who have an interest in youth issues and policies, members of all parliamentary parties, whose goal is to realize the interests of young people in the country, in cooperation with youth organizations, informal youth groups and party youth groups. This parliamentary club was established following the example of the European Parliament and other Western European parliaments, and its goal is to contribute and advocate for youth issues and interests in the Parliament. This informal body has so far implemented a huge number of youth activities, and a certain number of proposed legislative amendments or initiatives have been unanimously proposed or supported by the Club, regardless of the fact that its members include MPs from different political or ideological backgrounds.

How will this specifically contribute to improving the position of young people and retaining young people in the country?

As previously mentioned, young people are an important part of society and they bring fresh ideas, energy and innovations that are crucial for solving current problems and building a better future. The representation of young people in politics will ensure that their needs and priorities are respected, such as creating better conditions for education, employment and quality of life. In order to improve the position of young people and to retain them in the Republic of Macedonia, it is necessary to create favorable conditions for their political, social and economic activity. This includes political inclusiveness, economic incentives for young people, as well as creating mechanisms that will strengthen the trust in institutions.

By doing so, we expect young people to feel encouraged to stay in the country and participate actively in its advancement, along with all other age groups.

Arguments will be attached on how to improve the position of young people and retain them in the Republic of Macedonia.

⇒ Improving employment opportunities and economic development

Encouraging investment in new industries can create new jobs for young people. Programs to subsidize startups and young entrepreneurs can enable young people to start their own businesses. Higher wages, especially for highly skilled professions, will keep young people in the country and increase their economic independence. Focusing

on the professions of the present and the future²⁸, i.e. on the possibilities for flexible working hours, remote work, as well as encouraging and supporting "freelancing" as an opportunity that the digital age enables for many professions.

⇒ Improving health and social support for young people

The health system should be reformed to provide quality and accessible services for all, and in particular to take into account the needs of young people in terms of health care and prevention. This could include access to health insurance, free or subsidized health services for young families, as well as special packages for high school students, university students, etc. Improving social security, through subsidies for young individuals or young families, will increase the standard of living of young people and is expected to reduce their need to migrate for existential or better quality of life reasons, with healthcare, education and an ecologically clean environment taking center stage.

⇒ Supporting youth activism and political participation

Improving the political and civic engagement of young people in society - Creating platforms for young people to engage in politics and fight for their interests, such as youth parliaments and advisory bodies.

A positive example of such activities is the "Election Navigator" Project from the Center for Research and Analysis NOVUS from Strumica²⁹, which offers youth engagement programs through leadership development, forums, and networking opportunities in order to improve their active involvement in decision-making and advocacy efforts.

⇒ Improving the rights and freedoms of young people

Strengthening the rights of young people in all aspects from basic human rights through economic or labor to social rights will increase their trust in the system and encourage them to stay. It is necessary to reform public institutions and their awareness of the need to create inclusive youth policies that will focus on: 1) inclusion of young people

²⁸Analysis by the Institute for Good Governance and Euro-Atlantic Perspectives (IDUEP Institute) with recommendations on the topic "What young people want - Professions of the future require knowledge and skills today"

²⁹The "Election Navigator" project, Center for Research and Analysis NOVUS from Strumica, supported by NED, 2024

with all their specificities, different needs of target groups, etc.; 2) the opportunity for young people to make decisions in the domain of all public institutions and different sectors, as well as within the processes on both local and national levels; 3) opportunities for young people to be beneficiaries of various youth programs, but also to implement policies and activities intended for young people in order to bear responsibility for their evaluation and necessary change or adjustment.

⇒ **Improving living conditions and infrastructure**

Investing in the modernization of infrastructure in all regions, from roads to internet networks, will create more attractive living and working conditions for everyone in the country. But these measures are also of great importance for young people, as they will enable mobility, as well as conditions for connections and development on par with those offered to young people in the member states of the European Union (EU) and other developed countries.

Additionally, investing in all types of infrastructure is expected to strengthen the need and desire of young people to build careers and personal life plans in their country, i.e. it will reduce the strong outflow and emigration of young people that is characteristic for North Macedonia and the Western Balkans as a whole.

⇒ **Increasing the involvement of young people in all areas of social life**

Support for the youth in their volunteering initiatives, startups and innovations that will encourage them to realize themselves in the country and realize their ideas without the need to move abroad. With such measures and activities to include youth representatives in every sphere of action, public institutions and society will send a clear message that young people are not only "consumers" and people who listen and act, but are also creators and shapers of their own and the future of society as a whole.

⇒ **Need for continuous educational reform and connection to the labor market**

It is necessary to offer vocational training programs, internships, and scholarships for young people who want to study in technical and scientific fields. This will allow young people to acquire relevant skills that will make them competitive in the labor market.

At the same time, adapting the education system to new ways of education and introducing components from the informal to formal education, practice and specific skills adapted to the skills of the present and the future, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), digitalization and cybersecurity, but also craftsmanship as one of the most deficient professions.

⇒ **Support for entrepreneurship and innovation**

This will help young people to start their business careers without facing excessive financial obstacles. Also, the creation of mentoring and consulting services will help young people to advance their entrepreneurial activity.

To this purpose, greater involvement of young people and their organizations that represent them is needed in order to accept and implement the initiatives and projects they propose. One such example is the draft initiative sent to the Government titled "Youth create in their own country"³⁰, which aims to respond to the current challenges with the outflow of young talents from the country, offering specific measures for financial and institutional support to young graduates in the country. This project is aimed at stimulating the entrepreneurial spirit among young people by awarding vouchers of up to 10,000 euros that can be used to establish startups, their own businesses or continue education, i.e. acquire new skills. This measure aims to create opportunities for young people to realize their professional ambitions at home, instead of abroad, and thus contribute to the economic and social development of the country.

³⁰Proposal for the initiative "Youth Create in Their Country", National Student Body (NST) and IDUEP Institute, 2024

Which activities are proposed to be undertaken in order to overcome this gap and contribute to an increased and adequate participation of youth in policymaking?

In order to improve the position of young people and their retention in the Republic of Macedonia, the group of authors propose the following measures and activities:

1. Greater involvement of the youth in winning positions on electoral lists with the aim of obtaining mandates in the Assembly, this activity may also include certain legal amendments, and should be supported by the political parties in the country, as well as by all other socio-political factors in the country.

2. Legislation for greater importance of the Club of Young MP's (Club for Youth Issues and Youth Policies) in the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia. Elevating the Club to the rank of an Assembly Committee or, alternatively, another legal status which will transform it from an informal into a formal legislative body with specific mechanisms and legal instruments for dealing with youth initiatives and proposals.

3. Youth integration in the creation of the Budget, as well as in the creation of local budget programs and plans.

3.1. Introducing the "Youth Budget"

It is proposed to reserve a certain percentage of the national and local budget, which will be intended for projects and initiatives directly selected by young people through their organizations. This budget should be managed transparently, through youth councils or forums, to ensure the realization of the needs and ideas of the youth population.

3.2. Transparent budget consultations

Establishing regular public consultations where young people can participate in planning and proposing budget priorities. These consultations should also be organized digitally in order to enable broader youth participation.

3.3. Youth projects of national importance

Encouraging young leaders and organizations to propose and implement projects that will have a long-term contribution to the community. Financing for these projects should be provided through specialized funds within the "Youth Budget".

3.4. Preparation of an annual report on the "Youth Budget"

Publishing an annual report on how and on what the funds from the "Youth Budget" are spent, in order to ensure transparency and accountability to the public. This will increase the trust of young people in institutions and will motivate them for greater participation. In addition, the opportunity for digital continuous monitoring of the ways in which the funds from the "Youth Budget" are spent, as well as the opportunities for proposing, involving and shaping activities by young people.

The implementation of this point is expected to further highlight the importance of youth participation in the decision-making process related to finances and it will ensure a real contribution of the youth to the development of society.

A LIST OF INSTITUTIONS, ORGANIZATIONS AND OTHER ENTITIES RESPONSIBLE FOR IMPLEMENTING THE CHANGE AND HOW DO WE EXPECT THEM TO SPECIFICALLY CONTRIBUTE?

In the context of creating policies for equitable youth representation in decision-making, coordination between different institutions, organizations and entities is needed. These are some of the key actors identified by the group of authors, as well as the expected contribution from public institutions:

1. Public institutions

The Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia

Responsible for changing legislation and establishing the general legal framework that (dis)enables greater youth participation at the local and central levels.

Expected contribution:

- Strengthened role of the Club for Youth Issues and Policies (Young MPs' Club) with the aim of constantly submitting youth initiatives in the legislative sphere, as well as creating a true youth body in the legislature.
- An overview of all legal acts that can and should be amended or enacted in order to enable fair and greater youth participation at every level of the government, as well as incentive measures for this purpose.

Ministry of Education and Science (MES)

Responsible for creating youth development programs, providing access to quality education and promoting active civic awareness among the youth.

Expected contribution:

- Introducing educational programs for the development of leadership and organizational skills.
- Encouraging research on youth needs.

Ministry of Social Policy, Demographics and Youth (MSDPY)

Responsible for youth policies, including their social and economic integration.

Expected contribution:

- Providing a legal framework for youth representation in decision-making bodies.
- Financial support for youth initiatives.
- Support in the formation and coordination of youth councils on local and national level.
- Organization of programs for inclusion and participation in decision-making.

The Local Self-Government Units (LSG), the Local Youth Councils (LYC) and the Association of Local Self-Government Units (ZELS)

Promoting youth inclusion through the creation of youth centers and support programs and overall stimulation of the number of mayors and councilors from among young people aged 18 to 29.

Expected contribution:

- Introducing youth representatives into local decision-making bodies.
- Support for local initiatives and projects by young people.

2. Civil society organizations

Youth organizations and networks

Key actors for representing youth interests and activating the youth.

Expected contribution:

- Organization of youth awareness and advocacy campaigns.
- Support for youth projects and initiatives.
- Networking and building partnerships

Other non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

They work on building the capacities of young people to participate in decision-making.

Expected contribution:

- Providing training in leadership, public speaking and advocacy.

- Encouraging dialogue between youth and institutions.
- Proposing and submitting multiple projects that partially or fully focus on young people and their initiatives, and especially youth representation in decision-making processes.

3. International organizations and donors

They support projects for youth inclusion and development. Example: funds like Erasmus+ and other youth programs.

Expected contribution:

- Financial and technical assistance for youth programs.
- Organizing trainings and exchange of good practices.
- Greater focus on creating Programs to support young people, youth organizations, and especially strengthening youth representation in decision-making processes.
- Encouraging the exchange of experiences through international projects of young people and youth organizations from different countries, thereby encouraging regional, European and overall international cooperation.
- Funding initiatives for the inclusion of young people in decision-making, thereby setting an example of how in each program it is necessary to support youth or other organizations that represent young people in a certain percentage.

4. Private sector

Companies and Corporations

As socially responsible entities, they should invest in youth programs. Such programs can be further encouraged by government institutions through incentive policies and measures for all companies that decide to take such steps.

Expected contribution:

- Support for scholarships and youth development programs.

- Promoting youth entrepreneurial ideas.
- Placing more young people in leadership positions in the private sector, and especially in professional associations – chambers of the private sector.

5. Young activists (through informal groups and movements)

Active youth individuals or groups can directly initiate change through projects, protests, and other forms of activism.

Expected contribution:

- Promoting youth needs and rights.
- Organizing activities to increase the visibility of youth issues.
- Motivating a greater number of young people to influence society and directly create positive changes, which will undoubtedly lead to an increase in the capacity and quality of young people in decision-making at the central and local levels.



Final point:

Only with active involvement of all the listed entities can a system be built that will guarantee equitable youth representation and contribution to the development of a successful and inclusive state.

SIX ADDITIONAL PROPOSED INITIATIVES AND IDEAS FOR COLLABORATIONS AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF THESE INSTITUTIONS, ORGANIZATIONS AND OTHER ENTITIES WITH THE AIM OF THEIR GREATER INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROCESS OF CREATING CHANGE: GREATER AND EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AT CENTRAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

To encourage cooperation and increase the involvement of institutions, organizations and entities in the process, it is necessary to undertake specific initiatives that will facilitate communication, promote transparency and ensure activities.

Proposal-initiatives prepared by the participants of the " Hackathon for politics" organized by NOVUS:

1. FORMATION OF A NATIONAL YOUTH PLATFORM

Creating a formal platform where young people and representatives from institutions, organizations and companies can meet, exchange ideas and create policies through:

- Organization of regular meetings and forums.
- Presentation of results from youth projects.
- Recommendations for improving the legal framework.
- Enabling direct cooperation between young people and decision-makers.

2. MENTORING AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Every youth representative should receive the opportunity to be mentored by hiring a mentor from a public institution, civil society organization or the private sector, who will guide him/her through the decision-making process.

- Involving successful leaders from the public and private sectors as mentors.
- Providing communication and leadership training.
- Organizing mentoring sessions and conferences.
- Development of youth capacities.

- Improving relations between the youth and institutions.

3. LOCAL YOUTH COUNCILS – COMPLETING THE LEGAL OBLIGATION

Establishing youth councils in all municipalities, which will be composed of local youth, municipal representatives, non-governmental organizations and political youth.

- Defining local priorities for the youth.
- Organizing local development actions.
- Connecting with national institutions to solve larger problems.
- Promoting youth inclusion on a local level.
- Reducing the outflow of youth from rural areas.

4. YOUTH BUDGET INITIATIVES

In addition to the local level, introducing the so-called "youth budgets" at the national level, where young people will directly propose and decide on financing projects that are in their interest.

- Creating transparent application mechanisms.
- Organizing public discussions on budget priorities.
- Involving the youth in the budget review and monitoring process.
- Enabling young people, directly or through their youth organizations, to participate in policy making.
- Encouraging responsibility among institutions towards young people and their needs.

5. YOUTH ACCELERATOR FOR IDEAS

Creating a program that will support young people in developing ideas through grants, training, and mentoring.

Key activities:

- Organizing competitions for youth ideas.
- Providing resources to implement the best projects.
- Connecting youth with the business sector for support.
- Encouraging innovation among young people.
- Involving the private sector in solving social problems.

6. PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS AND ROUND TABLES

Organization of regular public debates where young people, institutions and experts will discuss specific issues.

- Defining topics relevant to youth development.
- Providing open access for all interested parties.
- Summary of the proposals and their submission to the competent authorities.
- Enable two-way communication.
- Improving transparency in decision-making.

With these initiatives, all relevant entities will be more actively involved in the process, and young people will gain visibility, support, and influence in creating decisions for the future.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE:

1. A period of 1-2 years:

- * Identification of needs and priorities: conducting research, surveys and consultations with young people to understand their needs and views regarding participation in decision-making.
- * Educational and informative campaigns: Organizing campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of youth participation in political and social life.
- * Training and capacity strengthening of youth organizations: Training for youth leaders and activists to improve their skills in advocacy and influence in decision-making processes.

2. A period of up to 5 years:

- * Integration of the youth in decision-making processes: Development of institutional mechanisms that will provide more space for young MPs in the Assembly, councils and all other organs and bodies that participate in decision-making.

3. A period of up to 10 years:

- * Full establishment of youth participation mechanisms: Establishment of long-term and sustainable institutions and mechanisms which will guarantee the continued participation of the youth in decision-making processes.
- * Reform and adaptation/monitoring process and evaluation: Continuously monitoring the effects of youth involvement and, if necessary, adjusting strategies to ensure greater inclusion and equity.

CONCLUSION:

WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO BRIDGE THE GAP AND ACHIEVE GREATER PARTICIPATION, I.E. EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION OF THE YOUTH IN POLICY-MAKING AND DECISION-MAKING?

Bridging the gap and increasing youth participation in policy-making and decision-making is essential for building more inclusive, democratic and sustainable societies. If young people are actively involved in decision-making processes, they will not only contribute new ideas and perspectives, but will also help in forming policies that will shape a better future for all target groups. Therefore, every social structure should actively work to encourage youth participation, as well as to create conditions for their active, equitable and full representation in social processes.

Increasing the number of youth candidates on parliamentary lists, councilor and mayoral lists is an important prerequisite for creating inclusive, democratic and just societies. Through greater representation of youth representatives on these lists, it will be possible to create policies which will take into account the needs of all generations and provide sustainable solutions for the future in all domains of governance.

Also, increasing the number of young MPs, councilors and mayors is crucial for the development of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable societies on a local level. The presence of young people in politics not only refreshes the political scene with new ideas, but also ensures the creation of policies which will be in the interest of future generations. Young people are the bearers of change and innovation, and their active role in policy-making is expected to have a long-term positive effect on society. In order to achieve these goals, specific and systemic measures are needed which will ensure greater representation of young people in politics, both on a national and local level.

In order to ensure progress and adapt public institutions to modern challenges, it is important to create conditions for young people to take on important positions such as ministers, deputy ministers and directors of public institutions. The path to this goal also leads through formal education, where it is necessary to organize mentoring programs with experienced professionals who will guide young people and help them identify and continuously develop their leadership skills. Furthermore, young people need to fight and get the opportunity to start working in positions of high responsibility which are considered to be reserved only for older people, as well as to receive support in their ambitions and activities from experienced leaders or so-called veterans.

Finally, it is equally important to mention that young people themselves need to demonstrate and prove on a daily basis that they are achieving concrete results by introducing innovations in their actions, creating new initiatives, and solving problems on a local or national level.

USEFUL LINKS:

<https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSoopstene.aspx?rbrtxt=146>

<https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Youth%20on%20elections%202024%20MK.pdf>

<https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Youth%20on%20elections%202024%20MK.pdf>

<https://izborennavigator.mk/>

<https://www.vesti.mk/article/65c8dc5b8617e01cc1bb30cb>

<https://iduep.org.mk/2023/03/21/analiza-na-iduep-so-preporaki-shto-sakaat-mladite-profesiite-na-idninata-baraat-znaena-i-veshtini-denes/>

<https://iduep.org.mk/2024/10/24/nst-i-iduep-so-predlog-initsijativa-do-vladata-mladite-sozdavaat-vo-svojata-zemja/>



Центар за истражување и анализи

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