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REPRESENTATION OF YOUTH IN LOCAL ASSEMBLIES IN SERBIA (Translation *In Extenso*)

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of young people in local assemblies and the factors that may influence it. The first part of the study explores the legal status of youth within Serbia's legal system, youth participation, local self-government, local elections, and the instruments of local youth policy. The paper then outlines the methodological approach, data collection, and coding procedures using the statistical software SPSS, as well as the construction of dependent and independent variables. The first set of variables pertains to the demographic characteristics of municipalities and cities, the second set relates to scholarships for pupils and students, and the third set concerns local youth policies aimed at enhancing youth participation in decision-making processes. The total number of young councilors in Serbia amounts to 386 out of a total of 6,483 councilors, representing 5.95%. Through correlation analysis, all hypotheses were rejected except for the hypothesis that the number of young councilors in local self-government units is influenced by the type of local self-government, the number of voters and councilors in a municipality or city, and the size of the municipality or city, with weak to moderate correlation. Hypotheses concerning the influence of student scholarships and instruments of local youth policy on the number and percentage of young councilors in local self-government units were

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rejected. The findings indicate that support for students, as well as local youth policy instruments, do not contribute to an increase in the number of young councilors in local self-government assemblies in Serbia.

Keywords: youth, councilors, representation, youth participation, local youth policy

INTRODUCTION

Youth represent a distinct social, economic, sociological, and political category in every society and state. While there is no universally accepted definition of youth, the age range typically associated with youth is between 12 and 35. In the Republic of Serbia, youth are defined as individuals aged 15 to 30 (Zakon o mladima 2011). The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia defines that every adult has the right to vote, and the same legal act defines that “adulthood is acquired upon reaching the age of 18” (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006). Therefore, a portion of young people do not have the right to vote (aged 15 to 18), but the majority of young people (aged 18 to 30) in Serbia have voting rights. According to the latest census (RZS 2022), Serbia has approximately 1.5 million young people, constituting almost 16% of the total population. An estimated 200,000 of them are under 18, which, according to the latest voter list from December 2023, when there were 6.5 million voters in Serbia, means that there are about 13% of voters who fall into the legal category of youth (Stojanović, Ivković, and Kalićanin 2024), representing a very significant political target group. Given their representation in the population, we would expect young people to be at least similarly represented in representative institutions in Serbia (the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and the assemblies of local self-government units in Serbia). This is a key research question in this paper: how politically represented are young people in their local communities, and what factors influence their representation?

YOUTH REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL YOUTH POLICY

Youth participation at the local level can be viewed on two levels: one more closely related to political involvement and the other to participation in and contribution to community improvement. The first model of youth participation and involvement represents participation in decision-making processes and advocacy at the local level (advocacy for specific public policies). In contrast, the second model focuses more on community activities through various programs related to collective action and youth skills development, which can be characterized as community work (Berthin 2014). Additionally, the most significant measure of influence on decision-making regarding youth is the participation of young people in representative and executive bodies of local self-government (Augsberger, Collins, and Gecker 2017). However, young people are underrepresented worldwide in representative/legislative bodies (Bidadanure 2021; Kurz and Ettensperger 2023; Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022). The situation is similar in the Republic of Serbia. However, we have yet to get exact data on the participation of young people in local assemblies in previous convocations of local self-government units. As a comparison, we can take the number of young MPs in the last 20 years, which varies from 1.2% in the 2016 parliamentary convocation to 8.8% in the 2008 convocation and 11.2% in the 2020 convocation (Stojanović, Ivković, and Kalićanin 2024).

Article 8 of the Youth Act defines the Principle of Active Youth Participation, stating that “all, and especially the subjects of youth policy, shall ensure a supportive environment and provide active support for the implementation of youth activities by young people, the taking of initiatives and their meaningful involvement in the processes of decision-making and implementation of decisions that contribute to personal and social development, based on full information of young people,” and Article 10 of the Law, which defines the National Youth Strategy (as the highest planning document of public policies for youth), states that “the strategy is a document adopted by the Government, at the proposal of the ministry, which regulates, in particular - the active participation of young people in social life” (Zakon o mladima 2011). The National Youth Strategy for the Republic of Serbia for 2023-2030, adopted just last year, provides for a Special Objective 3 of the strategy entitled: “Young people are active participants in society at all levels.” Furthermore, this objective is more precisely achieved through measure 3.1, which

states: “Creating conditions for the involvement of young people in decision-making processes and policies that affect them, as well as their development, application, monitoring of implementation and evaluation” (Strategija za mlade 2023). Therefore, the law and the strategy governing youth policy should influence youth activism and promote participation in decision-making processes. Youth policy instruments and subjects should encourage youth participation in social life.

Given that we are discussing active participation at the local level, the Youth Act and Strategy envision various instruments of local youth policy such as youth offices, youth councils, youth clubs (youth spaces), youth strategies, and action plans as documents of local youth policy, financing of local youth policy through local budgets, and funding of youth associations and associations for youth through local budgets (Zakon o mladima 2011; Stojanović 2021; Milenković i Petrović 2023).

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Local self-government in Serbia is a constitutional category and guarantees citizens “the right to local self-government through freely elected representatives” (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006). Local self-government is the right of citizens to directly and through freely elected representatives manage public affairs (Zakon o lokalnoj samoupravi 2007). Local self-government in Serbia is implemented through municipalities, cities, and the city of Belgrade, and cities can establish municipal boroughs, which are not units of local self-government as established by city statutes (Stojanović 2022b).

Local self-government in Serbia is characterized by: a) a single-tier model of organization – although there are municipalities, cities, and the city of Belgrade, they are all at the same level of local self-government and it represents a single-tier level of territorial organization of local government (Stojanović 2014; Stojanović and Jović 2014); b) a low level of financial autonomy and independence (Stojanović 2014); c) a very low level of “electoral definitiveness” as an element of local democracy where only local elections determine the formation of local government, expressed by the mirroring of the republican coalition at the local level and a high level of overly broad local coalitions to maintain coalition

agreements at the national level (Stojanović 2022b); d) the absence of citizen representation in local assemblies or the lack of a link between local councilors and citizens (Stojanović 2014; Stojanović 2022b), e) conducting party and national campaigns in elections (Stojanović and Jović 2015; Stojanović and Jović 2017; Lončar and Stojanović 2016), and f) a very high dependence of local boards on the headquarters of political parties as a result of low intra-party democracy (Stojanović 2022b). Local elections should be a holiday and a school of democracy instead of being elections of lesser importance (Jovanović 2008) or so-called “testing ground” elections (Matić 2013) for national elections. Councilors in the Republic of Serbia in municipalities, cities, and the city of Belgrade, as well as in municipal boroughs where they exist, are elected by a proportional electoral system in a single electoral unit with an electoral threshold of 3% and closed electoral lists for both citizens and parties – party electoral lists (Stojanović 2022). Additionally, it is essential to emphasize that data from monitoring election campaigns, both broadly and of young people in them, indicate that election campaigns in Serbia do not pay too much attention to young people, nor are young candidates key actors in campaigns (Lončar 2012; Spasojević and Stojanović 2014; Stojanović 2020; Stojanović 2022a; KOMS 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In this analysis, we will examine the impact of various factors on the number of young elected councilors and their percentage relative to the total number of councilors in local self-government units. We will use three sets of independent variables. The first set of variables relates to the demographic, typical electoral characteristics, and the level of development of local self-government units. We will investigate whether the type of local self-government unit - whether it is a municipality or a city, the number of inhabitants of the local self-government unit defined in four categories (up to 10,000 inhabitants, from 10 to 50,000 inhabitants, from 50 to 100,000 inhabitants, and over 100,000 inhabitants), and the level of development of the local self-government unit divided into five development categories (“first group – development level above the republican average”, second group – development in the range “from 80 to 100% of the republican average”, third group range from 60 to 80% of

the average, fourth group – development below 60% of the average, and additionally – the fifth group of devastated municipalities with less than 50% of development compared to the republican average) influences the number and percentage of young councilors in local self-government units. (Vlada Republike Srbije 2015). Furthermore, variables in this set include the number of councilors to be elected (up to 30, from 30 to 50, and more than 50 councilors), the number of voters in the local self-government unit (up to 10,000, from 10 to 30,000, from 30 to 70,000, from 70 to 150,000, and more than 150,000 voters), and the election term (regular or extraordinary). Data sources for this set of variables include official data of the Republic of Serbia – laws, government decrees, the Census, reports of the Republic Statistical Office, and the website of the Republican Electoral Commission (Zakon o teritorijalnoj organizaciji Republike Srbije 2007; Vlada Republike Srbije 2015; Republički zavod za statistiku [RZS] 2020; RZS 2022; Republička izborna komisija [RIK] 2023; RIK 2024).

The second set of variables relates to the local self-government unit's (LGU) care for young people in the education category. In line with the competencies of local self-government units in the field of education (Zakon o lokalnoj samoupravi 2007), we examine whether there is a link between student and pupil scholarships granted or not granted by the LGU and the number of young councilors in the LGU. These variables are defined solely in terms of whether or not student and pupil scholarships for young people exist in the LGU. The data source for all LGUs is the author's database, collected through requests for information of public importance sent to all LGUs in the Republic of Serbia (Petrović i Stojanović 2021).

The third set of variables pertains to local youth policy in Serbia, which is also defined by law as one of the competencies of local self-government units (Zakon o lokalnoj samoupravi 2007). The Youth Act provides (optionally) several instruments of local youth policy to care for young people at the lowest level of government, and we have considered all of these instruments in terms of whether they exist or not. These instruments include the existence of a youth office in the LGU as an executive body of government that implements youth policy; funds in the LGU budget for the implementation of youth policy; a portion of budget funds allocated to youth associations and young people as subjects of

implementing local youth policy; a youth council as an advisory body to the LGU assembly; the participation of young people in the youth council; a youth strategy/action plan as a planning document that directs and creates local youth policy; and a youth club as an institution for young people where there is a space for young people. Additionally, we introduce variables that could influence our dependent variable, such as whether there were young (under 30) officials (politically elected officials) in the previous term and whether there was an institutionally designated official for youth in the last term (a member of the LGU council responsible for youth or an assistant to the mayor for youth). Furthermore, we create an index of local youth policy as defined by the representation of local youth policy instruments in each LGU. The source of this data is also the author's database, which was collected using a research instrument – a request for information of public importance sent to all LGUs in the Republic of Serbia.

Data on the dependent variables (number of young councilors in local self-government units and the percentage of young councilors in LGU assemblies) are also from the author's database (Stojanović and Ivković 2024). The data source is data from the website of the Republican Electoral Commission for local elections in 2023 and 2024, such as decisions on the allocation of mandates to councilors, reports on election results, decisions on consolidated electoral lists and individual electoral lists of parties, coalitions of parties or groups of citizens (RIK 2023; RIK 2024). The database of young councilors was created by cross-referencing these four sets of publicly available data. The database of the number of councilors is coded according to the number of councilors itself (from 1 to 9). In contrast, the percentage of young councilors is defined in five categories (no councilors, up to 5% of young councilors, from 5 to 10, from 10 to 15, and over 15% of young councilors). This study's total observations (N) is 145 (145 local self-government units in Serbia – municipalities, cities, and Belgrade without municipal boroughs).

Hypothetical framework – in this paper, we define several hypotheses related to the dependent variable, i.e., the number and percentage of young councilors in municipal and city assemblies. We also examine the impact of three sets of independent variables. The first relates to the demographic, typical electoral characteristics, and development of local self-government units; the second relates to the allocations of

local self-government units for student and pupil scholarships; and the third variables are related to the development and instruments of local youth policy. Based on the previously defined variables, we define the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The number and percentage of young councilors increase with a higher level (although the same level) of local self-government (urban areas) and a more significant number of inhabitants, voters, and the number of councilors to be elected, as well as with a higher level of development of the local self-government unit.

Hypothesis 2. The number and percentage of young councilors increase if LGUs allocate funds for student and pupil scholarships.

Hypothesis 3. The number and percentage of young councilors increase as the index of local youth policy increases as a summary of the existence of individual instruments of local youth policy.

Hypothesis 4. The number and percentage of young councilors increase if there are individual instruments of local youth policy.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The total number of young councilors in the Republic of Serbia is 386 out of a total of 6,483 councilors, which represents 5.95% of young councilors, which is more than twice the percentage of youth representation in local assemblies compared to their representation in the electorate. The average number of young councilors per LGU is 2.22 (standard deviation – 1.766). Here, we also present findings on scholarships and instruments for local youth policy. As many as 93 LGUs have scholarships for students, 52 LGUs do not, 42 LGUs have scholarships for pupils, and 103 LGUs do not. On the other hand, 102 LGUs have a youth office, while 43 LGUs do not. 97 LGUs allocate funds in the budget for local youth policy, while 48 do not allocate funds. Of these, 30 LGUs also allocate funds to youth associations and young people as subjects of local youth policy. A youth council exists in 84 LGUs but only in 61 LGUs. In 55 out of 84 LGUs, young people are an integral part of the Youth Council. A youth club exists in only 30 LGUs. There were young officials in the previous term in 34 LGUs, while there were none in 111, and in 65, there was an LGU official for youth, while in 80, there was not. Only one LGU has a local youth policy index of 9

(on a scale of 0 to 9), and that is the City of Leskovac. Only three have an index of 8, namely the city of Novi Sad, the city of Kruševac, and the municipality of Bečej. The total index of local youth policy is 3.66 (standard deviation – 2.177).

Table 1. Correlation of Variables on the Number and Percentage of Young Councilors

Variables	Number of Young Councilors	% of Young Councilors
Type of Local Government Unit	.346***	- .024
Size of Local Government Unit	.287***	- .086
Election Term	- .028	- .094
Development Level of LGU	- .147	.030
Number of Councilors Elected	.314***	- .043
Number of Voters	.345***	- .041
Pupil Scholarships	- .162	- .151
Student Scholarships	.096	.029
Youth Office	.081	.003
Budget for Youth Policy	.113	- .012
Budget for Youth Associations	0.38	- .137
Youth Council	- .004	- .003
Youth in Youth Council	- .136	.114
Youth club	.162	.063
Youth Strategy	- .093	- .091
Young Officials in Previous Term	- .004	- .002
Youth Official in Previous Term	.071	.014
Index of Local Youth Policy	.081	- .016

N=145, Statistical significance *** = $p < 0,001$; ** = $p < 0,01$; * = $p < 0,05$.

Correlation values range from -1 to 1; values from 0 to 0.3 indicate a weak correlation; from 0.3 to 0.5, a moderate correlation; from 0.5 to 0.7, a substantial correlation; from 0.7 to 0.9, a strong correlation; and from 0.9 to 1, a robust correlation.

Source: Author's analysis

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The correlation analysis reveals no statistically significant relationship for the percentage of young councilors, and the values are predominantly negative (12 negative versus 6 positive). On the other hand, for the variable of the number of young councilors, we have statistically

significant variables with a weak to moderate correlation, and they come exclusively from the first set of variables that deal with demographics, typical electoral characteristics, and the development level of local self-government units. We can immediately reject hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 related to the second set (scholarships for students and pupils) and the third set of independent variables (local youth policy).

The number of young councilors in LGUs is most influenced by the type of local government unit (municipality or city), the number of voters in the LGU, the number of councilors elected, and the size of the local government unit. In other words, cities will have more young councilors compared to municipalities; LGUs with a growing number of voters also have a more significant number of young councilors; the larger the LGU assembly, the larger the number of young councilors, and the more inhabitants an LGU has, the more young people there are, and a cross-tabulation of data confirms this.

On the other hand, we see that the number and percentage of young councilors are independent. There is no relationship between the existence of student and pupil scholarships, nor does it depend on the index of local youth policy in LGUs, nor is there any dependence on any individual instrument of local youth policy. These are exciting findings because they show that local youth policy instruments still need to achieve one of their primary goals, which is to encourage the active participation of young people in decision-making processes (especially not in representative and legislative bodies). An explanation can also be sought, as the functionality and actual work of existing local youth policy instruments still need to be examined. Still, the research was based solely on whether certain documents, administrative bodies, advisory bodies, etc. exist.

In discussing these findings, we must likely question what other potential factors influence the low representation of young people in local assemblies and their underrepresentation. Undoubtedly, the primary conclusion of this research is that local youth policy instruments do not yield sufficiently good results in youth participation in decision-making processes at the most critical level – participation in representative and legislative bodies. The socio-demographic characteristics of LGUs for which we found statistical significance regarding the impact on the percentage and number of young councilors are expected (although

with a weak to moderate correlation). Still, we certainly did not expect that none of the sets of independent variables related to youth policy or scholarships would affect the representation of young people in local assemblies.

As a topic for discussion and potential explanations of such results, we can mention several things that could be the subject of new research. Firstly, the institutional framework of elections at the local level (closed party lists) and, consequently, the low level of intra-party democracy where local committees have a high dependence on the headquarters of political parties. All of this probably demotivates young people from becoming more actively involved in political parties, as evidenced by research on young people, which shows that less than 5% of young people are involved (in membership) in political parties (Stojanović, Ivković, and Kaličanin 2024). Secondly, in line with intra-party democracy and the highly developed level of clientelism (Pavlović 2022) in Serbia, to which young people are likely to be less prone than older citizens, this could be a direction for further research on political participation and the representation of young people. Thirdly, the reasons for the small number of young councilors in LGUs and the underrepresentation of young people can also be sought in the lack of interest of young people in the work of local self-government units, i.e., local politics, generally low interest in political developments, the feeling that they cannot influence decision-making processes, and exceptionally low trust in almost all institutions (Stojanović, Ivković, and Kaličanin 2024). Fourthly, we should not forget that the local elections in 2020 were boycotted by virtually the entire opposition in Serbia, as well as part of the June local elections held in 2024 - which tells us about the irregularity and unpredictability of local political life and external factors that influence it. Fifthly, potential reasons should also be sought in the type of political regime in Serbia, i.e., undeveloped democracy and various elements of political struggle and political activities (Vladisavljević 2019; Bursać and Vučićević 2021).

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