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SB YCGN PROJECT

Youth Political Engagement at Local Level: The Role of Youth Councils and Open Youth centres

Research report

Klaipėda,
2019

1. Introduction

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Youth political participation and civic engagement are understood as important conditions for the development of local democracy¹, community governance² or community change³. However, numerous studies have shown that European youth is disengaged from local politics. This mostly concerns non-participation in local elections and membership in local youth parties⁴. The disengagement from politics is evident in Eastern and South European countries⁵, but is also noticeable in some Scandinavian countries. For instance, the participation of young Danes in local elections has been decreasing since 2013⁶. This phenomenon is not marked with antipolitical zeitgeist. Some research studies reveal, that municipal politics, with the exception of some relevant policy issues like urban planning, ecology, or sustainability⁷, is less interesting to young Europeans. The political activism is increasing due to political crises. At the same time, there is empirical evidence, that

¹ PONTES, Ana; HENN, Matt; GRIFFITHS, Mark D. Towards a Conceptualization of Young People's Political Engagement: A Qualitative Focus Group Study. *Societies*, 2018, 8.1: 17, p.2-3.

² AUGSBERGER, Astraea; COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; GECKER, Whitney. Engaging Youth in Municipal Government: Moving Toward a Youth-Centric Practice. *Journal of Community Practice*, 2018, 26.1, p.1-2.

³ ALBACETE, Gema Garcia. *Young people's political participation in Western Europe: Continuity or generational change?* Springer, 2014, p.2; CAMPBELL, David; ERBSTEIN, Nancy. Engaging youth in community change: Three key implementation principles. *Community Development*, 2012, 43.1, pp. 64-65.

⁴ BARRETT, Martyn; BRUNTON-SMITH, Ian. Political and civic engagement and participation: Towards an integrative perspective. *Journal of Civil Society*, 2014, 10.1, pp. 19-23; ZANI, Bruna; BARRETT, Martyn. Political and civic engagement: theoretical understandings, evidence and policies. In: *Political and Civic Engagement*. Routledge, 2014. p. 3-6.

⁵ It necessary to take into account recent data from Eurobarometer 'Flash survey on European Youth' (2017). It gives evidence that, overall participation in a range of organisations and political activities has increased since December 2014. (EUROBAROMETER. (2018). *European Youth, European Social Survey Flash*, Report, Eurobarometer 455, pp. 9-10; CAMMAERTS, Bart, et al. *Youth participation in democratic life: Stories of hope and disillusion*. Springer, 2016, p. MAGGINI, Nicola. *Young People's Voting Behaviour in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*. Springer, 2016, pp. 73-74; MUNIGLIA, Virginie, et al. The analysis of youth participation in contemporary literature: A European perspective. *Youth participation in Europe: Beyond discourses, practices and realities*, 2012, 1-17; POLLOCK, Gary; PILKINGTON, Hilary; FRANC, Renata. Introduction: Thinking Globally, Understanding Locally. In: *Understanding Youth Participation Across Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018. p. 1-15; DILYTĖ, Asta; LAZUTKA, Romas. Jaunimo dalyvavimas politikoje: Lietuvos atvejis. *Socialinė teorija, empirija, politika ir praktika*, 14.14, pp. 89-101; KRZYWOSZ-RYNKIEWICZ, Beata; ZALEWSKA, Anna M.; KENNEDY, Kerry J. *Young People and Active Citizenship in Post-Soviet Times: A Challenge for Citizenship Education*. Routledge, 2017; Radosław Marzęcki. "How to Engage "Democratic Natives"?: MARZEŃCKI, Radosław. Political Sophistication as Important Determinant of Civic Activity of Young Citizens in New Democracies (the Case of Poland), *Romanian Journal of Political Science*. 2017, 17, 1, pp. 135-169).

⁶ ALMLUND, Pernille. Non-voting young people in conflict with the political system. *Journal of Political Power*, 2018, 11.2, pp. 230-231.

⁷ KERSTING, Norbert. *Local Political Participation in Europe: Elections and Referendums*. *Croat. & Comp. Pub. Admin.*, 2015, 15, p. 330; FLANAGAN, Constance A. *Teenage citizens: The political theories of the young*. Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 109-111.

unconventional political participation and online activism (boycotting products, signing a petition, etc.) has been increasing since 2012⁸.

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The youth protest movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg (Swedish schoolgirl, climate activist), could be seen as the symbol of a participatory pattern⁹. Some scholars discuss, that young people are not disengaged from political action, but are attracted to new modes of participation and new issues. Even old participatory slogan: “think globally and act locally” becomes particularly relevant when new movements can be recognised while acting bottom up approach for change in communities. Local community-based political participation becomes limited to youth as targeted interventional instrument (engagement youth in special programmes and civic live) development. It could be also linked to opportunities to express authentic political engagement for voicing their interests on municipal issues. Youth councils and other institutional platforms (youth centres, youth advisory boards) could be limiting or minimising the factor of “unconventional” participation.

The focus of this paper is the youth participation in form of youth councils and other organisations (youth centres, consultative platforms) affiliated with municipalities. The aim of this research is to understand the level of youth engagement and the main restraining factors in several European states. The goal of this research is to offer qualitative insights on how young workers and stakeholders (youth workers, experts, local politicians) perceive and understand political participation in form of youth councils and civic engagement in youth centres. What does to be “involved” in local politics and municipal policy making process mean to young people? What are the most appropriate forms for authentic political and civic engagement? What are the most relevant issues for the political participation of youth at a municipal level? What are the main restraining factors for youth engagement?

The three main research questions:

- What are the main barriers for youth engagement in municipal decision making in the form of youth councils and other institutional settings?
- What are the most effective and youth-friendly forms and tools for political participation at a local level?

⁸ GRASSO, Maria. Young People’s Political Participation in Europe in Times of Crisis. In: *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018. p. 179-196.

⁹ VAUGHAN, Adam. Climate protest goes global. *New Scientist* 2019, 41, 3221, p. 7.

- What the practices and the level of youth engagement within youth councils and open access youth centres?

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The present sample includes youth workers and stakeholders (youth workers, experts, local politicians, municipal administrators) living in Lithuania (Telšiai municipality), Poland (Dzierzgoń, Elbląg, Ilawa, Elbląg municipalities), Denmark (Køge municipality) and Sweden (Vimmerby, Hässleholm municipalities)¹⁰. The research paper is based on qualitative information, obtained from semi-structured and individual interviews in focus group with stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by research the team at the project activities in January, March 2019 and continued for about an hour (table 1). Interviews were audio recorded. The main characteristics of participant are presented in 1 Table.

Table 1. Sample description

Group interview	Municipalities and institutions	Number of informants	Place and date
Køge 1,	Hässleholm <i>Allaaktivitetshuset Fabriken</i> ; Sweden; Køge <i>Tapperiet</i> , Denmark; Vimmerby Lärcenter, Sweden	N=7	Køge <i>Tapperiet</i>
Køge 2,	Elbląg <i>Youth council</i> , Dzierzgoń, Polan; <i>Youth center</i> , Ilawa, Poland; <i>Youth council Poland, Telšiai municipal council for youth affairs</i> , Lithuania	N=8	Køge <i>Tapperiet</i> ,
Elbląg 1	Vimmerby Lärcenter, Sweden; Telšiai municipality, Lithuania; Dzierzgoń municipality, Poland.	N=8	Elbląg Historic City Hall
Elbląg 2	Telšiai Youth council, Telšiai municipality	N=7	Elbląg Historic City Hall

The individual interviews followed groups interviews. 17 individual semi-structured interviews with the adult stakeholders were conducted. The participants were selected from the stakholders who took part in the SB YCGN. South Baltic Youth Core Group Network project. The sample was composed from three types of participants: 1) youth workers (working with youth in open centres/ open access youth centres or with municipal youth councils); 2) politicians and public administrators (mainly from local government and some from regional institutions); 3) experts participating in project activities. The participants were asked to participate in interviews due to their role (working with youth and experiences

¹⁰ Stakeholders from municipalities whose took part in project Project SB YCGN. South Baltic Youth Core Group Network.

in youth, cultural and educational policies) and experience in SB YCGN project. In total 21 interviews were conducted with stakeholders over a four-month period.

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Prior to the focus groups, participants in this study were informed about the voluntary nature of participation in the research and of their right to leave the focus interview at any time should they wish so, without any reasons being questioned. At the beginning, rules regarding the respect for the views of participants, confidentiality and the importance of honesty were set. Informants were secured of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Results were gathered to provide a collective view of stakeholders' perceptions. All group interviews and main individual interviews were conducted by the authors. 7 individual interviews were conducted by research partners in Polish municipalities. Interviews lasted between 25 and 80 minutes. The interview guide was used with questions encompassing the youth councils' relations with municipalities (influence of policy decisions, communication), organisation, development and roles of youth workers.

2. Youth participation in municipal-decision making: the form of youth councils and youth centres

Youth political participation. The youth political participation in local government decision making is a complex phenomenon. In practice, it mostly takes diverse approaches, contexts and activities. Therefore, the academic scholars face conceptual and methodological challenges for making the research. The main academic discourse focuses on political youth actions or inactions, power relations between government institutions and organised youth groups, participative or engagement forms ('conventional' or 'unconventional'; formal or informal), or expansion of youth participation etc¹¹. The central issue in this debate is related to engagement framework of the young people interactions with local government. As the empirical studies reveal, different approaches have been used by municipal government in Western States for fostering and strengthening youth participation¹². Most of them have been successful. However, some critical research findings

¹¹ COE, Anna-Britt, et al. Youth politics as multiple processes: How teenagers construct political action in Sweden. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2016, 19.10, p. 1321-1322;

¹² FORDE, Catherine; MARTIN, Shirley. Children and young people's right to participate: National and local youth councils in Ireland. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 2016, 24.1: 135-154; FERINGA, Dana; TONKENS, Evelien. HOW THE PARTICIPATION STYLE IN LOCAL YOUTH COUNCILS CONTRIBUTES TO THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE. *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory & Practice*, 2017, 26, pp. 46-47; FELDMANN-WOJTACHNIA, Eva, et al. Youth participation in Finland and in Germany. Status analysis and data-based recommendations, Helsinki/München, 2010, p.27-27; FLÜGGE, Erik; WENZL, Udo. *Der 8er-Rat: ein barrierefreies Beteiligungsmodell für Jugendliche*. Springer-

reveal that the municipal consultative framework with youth have some weakness or are underdeveloped¹³. Indeed, there have been disagreements regarding evaluation and research criteria for assessment of results.

The special conceptual models have been developed for research or evaluation of the youth involvement in the decision of the government. These models are based on the degree of power transfer to young people. They are defined according different criteria such as: 1) level of power sharing to citizen (Sherry R Arnstein's "A Ladder of Citizen Participation")¹⁴; 2) progress of improving children rights and inclusion in society starting from non-participation to participation (Roger Hart's "Ladder of Participation")¹⁵. However, these models have some analytical restraints. The participation is explained as a linear process and it implies that young people is the goal in all situations. These models do not integrate not organised youth activities (symbolic or led by adults)¹⁶. They also do not include the concept of adult – youth control dimension in youth participation.

American researchers Naima T. Wong, Marc A. Zimmerman and Edith A. Parker proposed youth focused participation model, which offers some conceptual advantages over the previous models. It includes explanation of the five youth – adult partnership types based on involvement and empowerment that can be adapted¹⁷. This model encompasses adult-driven participations types (labelled as vessel with no input from young people or symbolic with minimal input, but without impact on decisions. The "prescriptive" mentoring relationship are used). The model also covers partnership types based on

Verlag, 2018, s. 2-5; LONCLE, Patricia; ROUYER, Alice. La participation des usagers: un enjeu de l'action publique locale. *Revue française des affaires sociales*, 2004, 4: 133-135; HAVLICEK, Judy; CURRY, Ashley; VILLALPANDO, Fabiola. Youth participation in foster youth advisory boards: Perspectives of facilitators. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2018, 84, pp. 265-270).

¹³ The criticism is based on several arguments brought by research findings: 1) young people decision is influenced by youth workers (that this model is too paternalistic) or they have difficulties in partnering with youth; 2) lack of legal certainty and adequate financial support; 3) limited responsibility to other youth groups; 4) part of municipalities use 'adult-led' approaches to youth participation which limits activities, initiatives, etc. (MORAN-ELLIS, Jo; SÜNKER, Heinz. Childhood studies, children's politics and participation: perspectives for processes of democratisation. *International Review of Sociology*, 2018, 28.2: 277-297; COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; AUGSBERGER, Astraea; GECKER, Whitney. Youth councils in municipal government: Examination of activities, impact and barriers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 65: 140-147; Cicchelli, Vincenzo. "The Contemporary Engagement of Young People in France: Normative Injunctions, Institutional Programs, and the Multiplying Forms of Grouping." *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* 1.2 (2009), pp. 118-119.

¹⁴ ARNSTEIN, Sherry R. A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of planners*, 1969, 35.4: 216-224.

¹⁵ HART, Roger A., et al. Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship. UNICEF, 1992, pp. 6-19.

¹⁶ HAVLICEK, Judy; CURRY, Ashley; VILLALPANDO, Fabiola. Youth participation in foster youth advisory boards: Perspectives of facilitators. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2018, 84, pp. 265-270

¹⁷ WONG, Naima T.; ZIMMERMAN, Marc A.; PARKER, Edith A. A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion. *American journal of community psychology*, 2010, 46.1-2: 100-114.

reciprocal (labelled as pluralistic. The adults and young people share responsibilities in decision making) or autonomous relationships (labelled independent; the adults support by giving resources and save place).

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Hypothetically, all model has some limitations and some advantages. Empirical research cases prove that some have benefits in youth participation process for development¹⁸ and support in community change¹⁹. On the other hand, studies reveal that even youth-led participative community projects have some constrains and barriers (youth workers “value” orientations, constraints in issue selection, etc.)²⁰ It is important to take into account that the participative practices are fluent, responding to the needs and social or cultural environment²¹. The last-mentioned factor affects the institutionalised framework for youth political participation at national or local level.

Municipal youth councils. Political participation in the form of municipal youth councils is one of the main mechanisms for young people to engagement at the local level. These institutions (they have quasi formal status) advise, consult and cooperate with municipal councils and administrative institutions²². The distinguished form of youth council is generally continuing connections with municipality or affiliated institutions. Young people can promote their interests in government decision making processes, local community governance or get support for their own initiatives²³. The youth councils’ relations with local government institutions are based on formal relations and the process is structured²⁴. Youth council members are often understood as experts on youth issues and policies²⁵. The expertise is concentrated on national umbrella organisations which supports national networks and

¹⁸ ZELDIN, Shepherd; CHRISTENS, Brian D.; POWERS, Jane L. The psychology and practice of youth-adult partnership: Bridging generations for youth development and community change. *American journal of community psychology*, 2013, 51.3-4, p. 386.

¹⁹
²⁰ KIM, Jangmin. Youth involvement in participatory action research (PAR): Challenges and barriers. *Critical social work*, 2016, 17.1: 38-53; OZER, Emily J. Youth-led participatory action research: Developmental and equity perspectives. In: *Advances in child development and behavior*. JAI, 2016. p. 196-199..

²¹ TISDALL, E. K. Children and young people’s participation. *Routledge international handbook of children’s rights studies*, 2015, 185.

²² AUGSBERGER, Astraea; COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; GECKER, Whitney. Best practices for youth engagement in municipal government. *National Civic Review*, 2017, 106.1: p. 16; NIR, Tal; PERRY-HAZAN, Lotem. The framed right to participate in municipal youth councils and its educational impact. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 69: 176.

²³ HORGAN, Deirdre. Consultations with children and young people and their impact on policy in Ireland. 2017, pp. 106-107; MUNIGLIA, Virginie, et al. The analysis of youth participation in contemporary literature: A European perspective. *Youth participation in Europe: Beyond discourses, practices and realities*, 2012, p. 5.

²⁴ COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; AUGSBERGER, Astraea; GECKER, Whitney. Youth councils in municipal government: Examination of activities, impact and barriers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 65: 145-147.

²⁵ TAFT, Jessica K.; GORDON, Hava R. Youth activists, youth councils, and constrained democracy. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 2013, 8.1, p. 91.

coordinates actions²⁶ On the other hand, youth councils have strong cooperation with other bodies (school councils, youth NGO, community organisations etc)²⁷.

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Considering the municipal youth councils' members, it could be noticed that the participation is valuable for them. Some studies reveal that youth councils' members have benefits in forms of civic and political education²⁸ as well as personal skills and a career development (valued as "something for

Municipal youth centres. Besides youth councils (and similar organisations like youth commissions, advisory boards, etc.) there are numerous organisational platforms for youth civic participation and youth socialisation. These organisations are affiliated with municipality in forms of financial and administrative assistance or owned and controlled by them. Some political sociologists name these organisations as civil society organisations following social capital theory approach²⁹. It is also important to note that youth organisations relationship between political participation and civic engagement forms unquestionable connection in various academic research fields³⁰.

The main features of the organisation variety of the formal or unformal membership (voluntary basis), voluntarism and activities oriented to civic socialisation. These organisations are working outside the schools. Most of organisations develop based on development of civic skills, but some of them are giving some youth services³¹. The youth are building trust with community and social networks in these organisations. It is important to notice, that some of skill are relevant for youth political participation. These organisations often serve youth as "schools of local democracy"³². Empirical studies done in European context prove that adolescent associational membership correlates with a higher level of political engagement in adulthood³³. But there is a new tendency, longitudinal Gema G.

²⁶ CUSHING, Debra Flanders; VAN VLIET—, Willem. Children's right to the city: the emergence of youth councils in the United States. *Children's Geographies*, 2017, 15.3, pp. 10-11.

²⁷ FLÜGGE, Erik; WENZL, Udo. *Der 8er-Rat: ein barrierefreies Beteiligungsmodell für Jugendliche*. Springer-Verlag, 2018, pp. 6-11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

²⁹ BAGGETTA, Matthew; BREDENKAMP, David M. *Systematic Social Observation in the Study of Civil Society Organizations*. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 2019, p. 1-2.

³⁰

³¹ MCFARLAND, Daniel A.; THOMAS, Reuben J. Bowling young: How youth voluntary associations influence adult political participation. *American sociological review*, 2006, 71.3: 402-405; QUINTELIER, Ellen. Engaging adolescents in politics: The longitudinal effect of political socialization agents. *Youth & Society*, 2015, 47.1: 54.

³²

³³ VAN DER MEER, Tom WG; VAN INGEN, Erik J. Schools of democracy? Disentangling the relationship between civic participation and political action in 17 European countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, 2009, 48.2, pp. 301-302; NIEUWELINK, Hessel, et al. Adolescents' experiences with democracy and collective decision-making in everyday life. *Political engagement of the young in Europe*. *Youth in the crucible*,

Albacete research reveals that institutional socialisation (in forms of volunteering, membership in NGO) is less effective for political participations of the 21st century young people generation compared with the generation of their parents. On the other hand, it depends on country-specific political context and socialisation systems³⁴.

Limiting factors to political participation through youth councils and youth centres. Several case studies focused on identifying factors for youth political participation in municipality affairs through local youth councils³⁵. According to the research, the main political barriers for the participation are linked to the weak ties between adult led institutions and youth councils (or imbalance of power)³⁶, conformist nature of relations (“play by the rules of the game” defined by adults)³⁷, under-representation of some youth groups (according neighbourhoods, gender, social status)³⁸, limited knowledge in public policy by council members³⁹ or not enough support for young people⁴⁰. Tal Nir, Lotem Perry-Hazan study reveals that youth council activities are confined due to framed sharing of decision-making power. The youth participation scope models are determined by adults working in municipalities⁴¹. The study findings prove, that the youth councils are operative, but not enough effective in promoting youth interest⁴².

2016, 174-198; ALBACETE, Gema Garcia. Young people's political participation in Western Europe: Continuity or generational change?. Springer, 2014, pp. 162-165.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 222.

³⁵ COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; AUGSBERGER, Astraea; GECKER, Whitney. Youth councils in municipal government: Examination of activities, impact and barriers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 65, pp. 140-147; SANT, Edda; DAVIES, Ian. Promoting participation at a time of social and political turmoil: what is the impact of children's and young people's city councils?. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 2018, 48.3, pp. 371-387.

³⁶ AUGSBERGER, Astraea; COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; GECKER, Whitney. Best practices for youth engagement in municipal government. *National Civic Review*, 2017, 106.1, p. 7-8; FAULKNER, Kathryn M. Presentation and representation: Youth participation in ongoing public decision-making projects. *Childhood*, 2009, 16.1, pp. 89-104.

³⁷ ADU-GYAMFI, Jones. Can children and young people be empowered in participatory initiatives?: Perspectives from young people's participation in policy formulation and implementation in Ghana. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2013, 35.10: pp. 1766-1772.

³⁸ MATTHEWS, Hugh; LIMB, Melanie. Another white elephant? Youth councils as democratic structures. *Space and Polity*, 2003, 7.2, p. 190; AUGSBERGER, Astraea, et al. Youth civic engagement: Do youth councils reduce or reinforce social inequality?. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 2018, 33.2, p. 17.

³⁹ RICHARDS-SCHUSTER, Katie; CHECKOWAY, Barry. Youth participation in public policy at the local level: New lessons from Michigan municipalities. 2009, p. 30; TONKENS, E. H.; FERINGA, D. How the participation style in local youth councils contributes to the civic engagement of young people. *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice*, 2017, 26, p. 55.

⁴⁰ AUGSBERGER, Astraea; COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; GECKER, Whitney. Best practices for youth engagement in municipal government. *National Civic Review*, 2017, 106.1, p. 19

⁴¹ NIR, Tal; PERRY-HAZAN, Lotem. The framed right to participate in municipal youth councils and its educational impact. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 69, p. 180-183.

⁴² COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; AUGSBERGER, Astraea; GECKER, Whitney. Identifying Practice Components of Youth Councils: Contributions of Theory. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 2018, 35.6: 607-608.

The studies focused on school councils limiting factors have not covered cultural and context variables. This was the result because of two reasons. Firstly, the young people political participation was based mainly on the case analysis. Secondly, researches gave less attention to cultural (national, participative traditions and organisational cultures) and municipal (regulatory frameworks and institutional structures, models, characteristic, etc.) context. These limitations could be reduced by comparative research.

3. Findings

Substantial differences in the organisation, processes and activities of the youth centres and councils have been analysed. The collected data were analysed according to three limiting political participation and engagement frameworks: 1) level of involvement with government in decision making processes; 2) organisational and operational barriers to youth involvement in politics; 3) limitations to youth political and civic development.

Table 2. **Key frames and themes**

Key Themes	Sub-Theme
The barriers to youth involvement in public policy formation	The connection and communication. Organizational structure of youth forums for political and civic engagement. The direct institutional connections. The youth influence during decision making on youth municipal policies and others. The support from politicians and municipal administrators to youth. Listening to the young involved people, consultations with youth organisations.
Limitations to youth political and civic development	Role of adults in activities. Procedures in activities, learning and sharing. Skill development. Role of municipality.
Level of involvement with government in decision making processes	The field of involvement for young people. Activities: engagement of young people in the local political decision-making process. Stakeholder perceptions regarding the significance and benefits of the youth involvement. The youth empowerment framework used to identify five types of youth participation (Naima T. Wong, Marc A. Zimmerman and Edith A. Parker).
Development of youth-friendly tools for participation	The development of “youth-friendly” and “accessible” tools for participation. The instruments, that recognise young peoples’ participation and sustain their involvement in local governance processes. Online tools for youth political engagements. Better consultation and platforms for meeting organisations.

The organisational and operational barriers to youth involvement in politics

Representation of youth groups. Focus group participants were asked to reflect on the main barriers to political engagement and participation. Upon reflection, the

participants mentioned that local decision making is very complex process (*Focus group, Elbląg 1*). It was also mentioned that there are organisational limitations concerning representation of all youth groups. For instance, Telšiai municipal council for youth affairs is made up of representatives delegated from youth organisations (4 members), NGO (2) and members of municipality institutions (city administration and controlled public service centres)⁴³. The qualitative data analysis demonstrated that some young groups are misrepresented (*Focus group, Elbląg 1, Individual interview 12*). However, as pointed out by one participant, this limitation by council structure is not essential and becomes important when financial support is distributed to youth organisation-initiated projects. It is also necessary to point out static, inflexible and inertial nature of institutions⁴⁴. With this kind of institutions, it is difficult to share power between municipality and youth, because the power is municipality-centered and linked to Telšiai municipal council for youth affairs.

Organizational structure of youth forums for political and civic engagement.

The participants of the focus group discussed the need to give the voice all young people in decision making through the best organisation. The participants and youth workers from two Swedish municipalities have discussed the importance of youth engagement by different ways. The following quotes from youth workers exemplifies the findings:

(I participant) *In Vimerby they are taking questions for politicians and politicians coming to us with questions too. The politicians say we want do this or this in our municipality. Then they give questions for youth council and ask them what do you think about the plans. We want to have your voice about planed things, So, we sit with them in youth council and discuss different things.*

(II participant, Hässleholm) *We [youth centre] have a reference group with different politicians. If we have any questions, then we bring those to them. We already have them in a co-group. Sometimes we go to others politicians who are from different departments. We also have open hearings. So, the politicians can ask youth about different*

⁴³ Such structure of all municipal youth council is determined by state regulation. The municipal councils are responsible for implementation of youth policy. The municipal youth councils have to coordinate national youth policy implementation on local level and consult central institutions on issues. The regulation also provides recommendations for cooperation between policy actors and youth engagement. The implementation of the national youth policy on the local level and central institutions consultations on issues have to be coordinated by the municipal youth councils. (Order of the Minister for Social Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2009-01-17, Nr. 6-201, Dėl Savivaldybių jaunimo reikalų tarybų pavyzdinių nuostatų patvirtinimo; Telšiai Youth council decision on ; Telšiai municipality council resolution, 2011 m. kovo 24 d. Nr. T1-124 Telšių rajono savivaldybės jaunimo reikalų tarybos nuostatai).

⁴⁴ DILYTĖ, Asta; LAZUTKA, Romas. Jaunimo dalyvavimas politikoje: Lietuvos atvejis. Socialinė teorija, empirija, politika ir praktika, 2017, 14, p. 90; 97; Department of Youth Affairs under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania. Quality improvement in municipal councils for youth affairs, 2016, pp. 3-7.

issues. For example, they ask what do we think about special decisions they had planned in municipality. And it is possible to discuss and let them understand everything. And if you talk or if you want to build the group, it will be understandable. [...] It is necessary for initiating engagement collective action. (Focus group, Elblåg 1)

The youth engagement process is based on the need and interest of Swedish municipality to hear the youth voices on public issues. The empirical data, reveals that they have several forms i.e. consultations with responsible local conciliators (contact persons) and administrators, meetings for a review of the spatial planning proposals and in other policies. The municipality attempts to keep the organizations open, responsive and reactive. In interviews, it was several times stressed that local political and administrative actors listen more to youth needs and interests than on empty talks (Focus group; Køge 1; Individual interview 13).

On the other hand, consultations with youth are situational and organised in relation to the purpose of the municipality or youth. The participants of the interview have explained that the main engagement field is related to the spatial planning, but other issues relevant to youth or all community could be included.

The collective representation of young people is the main feature of youth participation in Swedish municipalities. The participants of the interview have explained that the youth council does not have exceptional rights for the youth representation. Youth centres, school-based groups and innovative youth groups can engage in the decision making of the local government. The manager of the youth centre had explained the aims of the national policy and their local implementation.

In Sweden, it is a very, very important question to engage everyone. [...] We want to create the equality in the society. This is what we are really good at in Sweden - to engage everyone, even those young people whose are afraid to go to protest on street, to go and talk on social media or choose other way.

Two-way approaches of the youth and municipality connections are revealed by the interview data. Mainly it takes top-down approach, but it also combines a voluntary bottom-up approach with the guidance of youth workers. The youth workers play a role of gate keepers working closely with youth in the decision-making process.

This way multi-structured engagement process responds to the needs of youth (they are designed in relation to the purpose or problem situations) and municipality (satisfies the interest to consult the youth). The youth play role of ambassadors in the decision making

of the local government. On the other hand, the youth preferences for engagement are dominated by the youth social activities (social concerts, festivals, discussions etc.).

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The youth political socialisation as democratic fostering is less important in local councils or youth centres (*Focus group; Køge 1*). The young people engagement in consultations with municipality is not only understood as the learning of future politicians. It also not focused only on knowledge, skills and personal competence development and training. In comparison, in several interviews it was pointed out that some Polish and Lithuanian youth council members are too much focused-on preparation “for future careers and personal CV” (*Focus group; Køge 2; Individual interview 11*).

The empirical data reveals that Køge municipalities fall in the same pattern of youth civic engagement as analysed their Swedish counterparts. As interviews data reveal, the Køge municipality has strong focus on youth political participation (*Focus group, Køge 1*). It is not only based on youth centred policies on local, but also on central government policies (citizenship education, national policy of integration) and political culture (*Individual interview 11; Individual interview 16*). The municipal youth councils are supposed to engage in democracy and move for vote in elections. The similar role plays open youth centres, school councils and wide range of NGO’s working in municipalities. They are focused on youth engagement through volunteering or cultural and sport activities. Therefore, it is understandable that young Danes can acquire knowledge and civic skills through the participation in voluntary works. The participants of the interview have reflected that although very structured, youth participation is very well-organized. Youth organisations for civic and political engagement are adult-facilitated. The youth are engaged in decision-making with the care of adults. Adults, however, maintain the final say regarding activities of youth organisations.

Reflecting on what my colleague John has said, politicians don’t know what youth want, and the youth don’t know what politicians want. And I think it is difficult to sort this problem. I think it is difficult for the community. [...] In many places there are politicians who say that they want to have youth council, because it is their way or their policy. So, they did not neglect this. But later they asked, what are the best ways to work or this in most constructive way then. What I think is the most interesting that it works in many places. Of course, knowing, that the best initiatives that are working form the bottom. But when the comes from top? Ye, top down process. (Focus group; Køge 1)

As the quote illustrates, the challenging problem is the organisation of youth council as the central organisation in Danish municipalities. Participants have suggested that municipalities tend to focus on top-down structured youth engagement rather than prioritising

youth led initiatives. It was noted that systemic limitations within existing process were not inherited. The open youth centre in *Køge* and youth council-initiated activities have more sense of ownership in civic and political engagement (*Individual interview 16*).

On the other hand, as it was pointed out by the participants of the interview, youth-led projects of civic engagement with formal control from adults have been started by youth in one of Danish municipality (Aarhus). Such youth run actions left a good impression to *Køge's* youth after they had visited Aarhus youth centre. The youth and youth workers had discussions about the importance of youth leadership, responsibilities and challenges. Later, some autonomy in organising leisure events and cultural activities were given by the youth centre volunteers (*Focus group; Køge 1*).

The young people engagement in decision making together with polish municipalities has a variety of institutionalised forms (municipal or communal youth councils, student organisations, school councils, open youth centres, etc) research data. The municipal or communal youth councils are the main legitimate institutions in formal consultations with government (*Focus group, Elbląg 1*). They mainly focus on youth issues like education, sport, culture, local community services, etc. The polish youth councils are a successful form for formal consultations between young people and municipality in analysed municipalities. The participants could not point out any essential gaps in the process of youth engagement. However, as it was mentioned in the interview data, there are a lot of barriers in particular due to limitations in activities between politicians and youth working in councils.

Firstly, the needs of municipal government are not always aligned with the needs of youth. The politicians are focused on the engagement in volunteering initiatives therefore they bring even youth councils as human resource. The criticism was based on the idea that youth councils have to be embed in the municipal policy-making process. However, political engagement policy decision making through youth councils is over formalised and perfunctory.

Another argument brought in interviews was based on youth motivation to engage and attractiveness of forms and processes. Focus group participants expresses their concern in similar narratives:

The municipalities could not often involve youth. The local governments need young people's help. They need their volunteering work and their participation in local activities. But they are not motivated to involve in decision making. That is not interesting for them. [...] Another problem, that municipalities cannot make forms for continuous youth involvement. Youth starts and drops it later, without getting support (Focus group, Elbląg 1).

Even in the commune of Dzierzgoń, this youth council has been operating for 20 years. This youth council does not attract young people either. We can see that only 6 young people come to the (Upgrade to Pro Version to Remove the Watermark) for us [represents city government], it is also important how the youth is represented. [...] (Individual interview 6).

The research data reveals that youth councils do not completely solve the problem generally understood as the youth disengagement from Polish politics. The structures of formal youth engagement in decision making is not motivating young people. The participants of the focus group have discussed possible solutions of making youth political participation more attractive. Some of them have argued that it is necessary to make people more responsible by engagement through bottom-up approach. The interview participants recalled the need for bottom-up approach for consultations between youth councils and municipalities. One participant put it this way:

In my point of view, it is necessary to make young people more responsible and to strengthen their motivation in this way. The more responsibility for young people, the more they will be involved. So that they can feel the power. Their power, they can do something. They can change something. They can bring new ideas. They can be happy by doing something (Focus group, Elbląg 1).

Options about directing youth councils work from formal consultations to youth introduced social actions or even some activism were also discussed by other stakeholders. They brought the issue that for youth it is interesting not only advise, monitor legislative or administrative processes, but have real power in improving community or youth groups live.

The youth workers and politicians brought ideas about more open, inclusive organisations that can attract more young people and be more relevant to their needs and expectations. The open centre idea was discussed in interviews. The Polish participants mentioned that they have open or youth cultural centres in bigger city municipalities, but they are not always operative as platforms for political and civic engagements. One mayor reflected on the vision for youth engagement through new type organisation as follows:

This youth centre must have such an offer that will meet the expectations of this youth. And only with the active involvement of young people we can create such an offer. They must talk about their dreams and needs, and we must talk to them. Now we have to reach differently and we have to create an offer differently. A house of culture, even if it creates certain things, it is not always what they expect. (Individual interview 6).

The open centre was discussed as an additional form of civic engagement. The participants have not questioned the importance of the political engagement through youth councils, but stressed the importance of initiatives aimed at engaging broader involvement. The importance of collective identities with the issues important for youth were discussed by

the youth workers. The organisation of youth centres was linked to more attractive activities (wider events for discussions). Based on this logic, the activities and organisation can correspond to youth identities. Also, some cultural or social activities could later lead to civic actions. One participant from the focus group interview discussed the importance of the setting for working of youth council.

The youth councils of Dzierzgoń have meetings in the municipality building. This setting has specific influence on their behaviour when the session starts. The children are behaving not naturally. To say the truth, they are not very active. They are concentrating on the planned agenda, rules, but without being active and openminded. But we are creating such place in powiatach [the second-level unit of local government]. The youth are more open there and feel themselves free. They are also more natural, spontaneous. If we talk about youth visions, policy proposals. Maybe they have them in mind while sitting in more formal places, but it is difficult for all them to express them. They do not feel free. I think the place is very important.

In this narrative, the open and youth friendly structures were understood as one factor that could lead to the success. The issue has been based on his own experience as the youth care giver for youth council. A further issue with the place for participation was related to relevant emotional environment of the youth.

The communication between youth and politico-administrative actors

The interview data reveals that the youth political and civic engagement has some communicative barriers which are based on inflexible nature of formal processes and the lack of knowledge about public policies and bureaucratic language used in municipalities. These concerns have been brought forward by the participants of Polish and Lithuanian interviews. The Scandinavian counterparts have pointed out that municipalities use plain language and youth friendly tools in consultations with youth conciliators. In Swedish and Danish municipalities, the agenda for consultations are relevant to youth needs or expectations. Therefore, there are only some minimal gaps in communication and they are solved by introducing tools which are more appropriate for young people and are related to electronic communication.

I participant. We are working on the application in order to help young people to connect with politicians through us. They could ask us questions about the municipality and we could answer them. As we have just stated, we are currently in progress. There are a lot of municipalities around Sweden which are using this application. [...] You can have this app on the phone and use it to find information in a lot of municipalities or ask the questions. It is very important for youth to be able to do it very simply. Furthermore, politicians ask questions too. If you have an idea, you can bring it up and share it through the app. It is this platform and social media what connects youth with the politicians. However, we have heard

that it is sometimes not working properly and that it is working only in some municipalities [...] (Focus group; Køge 1).

This (Updated to PDF Version to Remove the Watermark) This (Updated to PDF Version to Remove the Watermark) is popular in Swedish municipalities. As the focus group participant has explained, most of municipalities are using online participatory tools used in planning in order to involve citizens. The special government engagement application has been specially developed and introduced to youth groups. Online participatory tools have first been introduced by Hässleholm municipality. However, the interview participants were cautiously optimistic about the possible effects. It has been discussed that innovative practices and working with the youth and children are sometimes more important than formal tools and procedures⁴⁵.

The consistent barrier for the youth political engagement is related to miscommunication between youth-adult leaders. Interview participants have criticised the existing forms of consultations, arguing that they should be made more youth-friendly (Telšiai, Elbląg cases). It was noticed, that consultations between the youth and the politicians do not work as they were intended. As one of the participants has concluded:

Well, this can be one of such communication barriers. Young people do not know about all the decisions that should be taken. Also, maybe not all of these decisions concern them. They are concerned with the youth issues that are directly related to them: communication, improper communication, lack of knowledge on given topics, and, above all, commitment (Individual interview 8).

The quote above explains that young people are interested in decisions relevant to local youth issues. It has been discussed that youth do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of legislative procedures, administrative or legal terms and the content of municipal policies. On the other hand, the communication issues are not an absolute barrier in youth political engagement process. One research interview participant shared his experience:

Difficult language of the documents might be the barrier. More... I do not know. We have an example of the active youth council, where young people who want to, can really do a lot. Now we have an example of a young girl from the youth council at a city council session, so I think it worked very well. She said what she wanted to say, the councillors and politicians heard her too (Focus group, Elbląg 1).

This reflects a relatively optimistic view of how the barrier of the bureaucratic language could be overcome and how communication can function as it was intended. The participants also saw difficulties in bureaucratic communicative style and supervisory cultures. As one of the participants has explained:

⁴⁵ There are scholar discussions about effectiveness of child-friendly policies and tools. Some researches findings reveal

Last year, there was a regional youth conference in Mažeikiai [Lithuanian town]. Me and the students have been invited to a discussion on the youth policy issues. But the event was prepared ineffectively. [...] It was a pity that the participants selected were not suitable. [...] It is necessary to prepare such events by inviting local politicians, public administrators who can communicate effectively and properly. [...] You see, our students could not understand technical speeches, so they left the event after the break. They feel, ..., such kind of events are too bureaucratic and “empty”. (Individual interview 8).

Another problematic part is that youth are involved through ‘projects’ and ‘activities’ rather than integrated into a common practice. This can illustrate the lack of communication related to political and administrative processes. It is important to point out issues in not only bureaucratic language and procedures. It is also about conceptions and understanding when youth views collides with political and policy approaches. The participants of the interview have noted that if the imitation or the manipulation in the consultation starts, the young people experience that they are being formally involved in decision making, but are not given any opportunities for influence. During individual interviews it has been discussed that the passive presence or tokenism are quite known phenomenon in some Polish and Lithuanian municipalities (Individual interview 10; Individual interview 9).

The participants have emphasised the need to make communication more youth-friendly. It has been put forward that changing the participatory processes is important for the most municipalities (*Focus group; Køge 1; Individual interview 7, Focus group, Elbląg 1*). The interviews participants have indicated that the adult facilitators (youth programmes coordinators or youth workers) are the essential actors for the youth in the engagement of political and municipal policy decision making processes. The adult facilitators plan and organise meetings between the youth and the politicians. This includes setting the agenda with the focus on issues relevant to young people (e.g. cultural and sport activities, youth centre issues) (*Focus group, Køge 1; Focus group, Elbląg 1*). The participants have reflected that issues (or municipal policy) based engagement is becoming more relevant to youth interests than traditional politics. One participant from the focus group has highlighted that some young people tend to refuse formal engagement through local councils, political parties and more accept civic engagement through social, environmentalism or volunteering (*Focus group, Elbląg 1*).

The participants of the qualitative research have suggested some solutions how to fulfil gaps in the communication between adults and youth. They have emphasized the importance of organisational and personal values and principles (i.g. mutual respect,

attentiveness, goodwill and dialogue, creativity etc.) as well as some instruments like using plain language, more systematic consultations, agenda-setting processes during meetings with youth councils, etc. Some examples of good practice projects have been shared by other participants from Telšiai municipality:

There was good practice project organized by the school teacher. What happened? Students observed municipal council members' behaviour during sessions. Especially those councillors who are more open, use expressive communicative style and often use specific jargon. And later, they had a simulation of municipal council session and tried to copy the behaviour models of concrete politicians. At the same time, they were imitating political procedures and had discussions. That kind of activities were very popular among students. Of course, they tried to be ethical during simulations and later had discussions about the political behaviour [...]

This illustrates that young people through the projects gain not only knowledge about procedures in city councils, 'rules of the political game', but also learn about political behaviour, rhetoric and styles of communication. Lastly, the political education in the form of the described project was very popular among youth. The informant has stressed that the project have helped to form students' understanding about acting in the local political field. On the other hand, this project was limited to a number of active youths. This approach has an elitist mark in comparison to other projects.

In contrast, Elbląg municipality have implemented more broad-based projects for youth political education and involvement in municipal decision-making frameworks through participatory budget.⁴⁶ The participatory budgeting became the main form of engagement of young people. As one participant has mentioned:

In Elbląg, we had the civic budget for few years. It is visible when it comes to influence what is happening in the city and around. [...] We do questionnaires on this topic in order to understand needs community or some group. It is one of the tasks assigned to us and we will start from that. And really, a lot depends on how media will present this initiative. It also depends on social groups and their interests. The schools are often active in this initiative and give some motivation for youth groups. The school leaders encourage them by saying that: "If you, vote for it, it will maybe be possible to win the pitch, fix this or that". And then youth become involved. Are they deeply interested in it? - It's hard to say. (Individual

⁴⁶ In Poland, the participatory budgets are very popular instrument for citizen involvement. In some municipalities the focus is on some targeted groups (youth, some neighbourhoods, etc.). At the beginning of 2018, the participatory budgets were formalized in national legal acts. (Bernaciak, Arnold, Agnieszka Rzeńca, and Agnieszka Sobol. ""New" public urban space: citizens' initiatives in participatory budgeting in Katowice, Łódź and Poznań." *Miscellanea Geographica* (2018); Bednarska-Olejniczak, Dorota, and Jaroslaw Olejniczak. "Participatory budgeting in Poland—finance and marketing selected issues." (2017): 55-67; Bednarska-Olejniczak, Dorota "Public participation of Polish Millennials—Problems of public communication and involvement in municipal affairs." In *Proceedings of the 22th International Colloquium on Regional Sciences*, Brno, Czech Republic, vol. 31. 2018).

interview 2).

This reflection reveals that civic budget is not popular among the general public. Nevertheless, the students are mobilised by schools and teachers for the participation in deciding of city expenses. This initiative provided information and educated young people about city budget expenditures, municipal priorities and their school needs. The youth council and their adult guardian took part in the process as coordinators with other partners.

Municipal youth councils and open youth centres in the youth engagement process

The analysis of the qualitative research data reveals that youth organisational forms are relevant to the local context. The research has revealed that youth councils and open youth centres have been initiated and started their activities in various ways. Often the organisations of the youth political engagement were fostered by instruments of national youth policies (*Individual interview 12; Focus group, Elblåg 1*). Several were started within the municipality by the mayor or council members and some youth centres have been started partly by the concern of youth themselves (*Focus group; Køge 1*).

The qualitative data demonstrates that open youth centres and youth councils continuously develop their organisations, activities or services which are provided to the youth. In case of youth centres, this covers not only general activities or services, but also youth political or civic engagement. This includes forms of consultation with municipalities, youth representation in the government and researching appropriate issues related to youth. One focus group participant has mentioned that they had even organised a protest against the closing of one of the centres sport facilities (*Focus group; Køge 1*).

The interview participants have reflected on the challenges due to changes in politics (mayor and council change after elections) and crises (youth leadership change due to leaving cities for studies in other towns) (*Focus group, Elblåg 1, Elblåg 2; Focus group; Køge 1*).

Regardless of the differences in organisation and activities, the open youth centres and youth councils have faced similar problems. The study has identified a wide variety of activities in which open youth centres and youth councils are engaged: education and cultural activities, community services, holding meetings, socialisation during spare time, etc. On the other hand, some open youth centres were operating as youth service organisations with leisure, sport and cultural facilities and infrastructure. The youth councils also had youth workers or facilitators who focused on youth political development and

training, thereby it could be partially associated with services as main activity (*Focus group; Køge 1; Individual interview 13*).

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The research data provides evidence that most of youth councils and open youth centres were led by adults. The relationships between youth workers or facilitators were typically based on partnerships between young people and adults.

Youth workers and facilitators played different roles, and responsibilities helping youth in councils and youth centres. The interviews provide evidence that youth workers were central to engaging youth in various civic activities, consultations with municipal government (*Focus group; Køge 1; Individual interview 13*). They have often organised consultation meetings, initiated civic projects and actions. According to the reflections, they have brought up topics for consultations or helped to develop project ideas. There was a variation in the sample, however youth workers were fully engaged in most cases while working at youth centres or with youth conciliators (cases of Polish, Danish municipalities). In some cases, youth facilitators had only given informal advice or guidance to youth councils (Telšiai municipality).

The stakeholders have stressed that the role of youth workers is very important for the political engagement. One mayor of a small city has reflected on the importance of the roles of youth workers for facilitation:

The competences of young councillors are formed by the youth guardian. The tutor provides them with the advisory assistance. This way they have full support. They learn all the time. There could be some gaps, but that's why they have guardians, so they do not have to know everything about formal procedures or specific legal regulations. [In general, the level - and so are the guardians, they do not operate themselves in this space. (Individual interview 6)

As this episode of the interview reveals, the mentoring relation is supportive and important for young people. The question is, how do the youth workers decrease the youth autonomy in the political participation and engagement. Qualitative data leaves some space for interpretations.

On the one hand, the municipality and youth get benefits in the form of the participatory guidance and the fulfilment of gaps in knowledge of the political and municipal policy processes. However, the youth council members could lose some autonomy taking into the account the issues, influencing policy agenda, choosing participative forms, etc. This sensitive question was reflected by one interview participant, who have guarded the local youth council for many years:

It's hard to talk about my own role. I think there is an important principle and message for youngsters, that young people can do something themselves by influencing

political decisions. This is an attractive idea, but the results depend on individual cases. The role of the youth guardian is important and the youth need them for shaping the political decisions. I have been upgrading this version to remove the watermark. They have taken better and worse periods in my work. Sometimes, you have to not only to inspire, to encourage young people, but also to help them. It is very important during politically sensitive and inhibit periods. (Individual interview 1)

This interview episode reveals that mentoring practices are fluent, responding to the needs of young people and the political environment. Interviews data demonstrates that youth workers act partly as gatekeepers and partly as supporters in the political engagement process. Another problem is related to the age factor. In most cases, the youth council members are secondary school age (from 14 to 18. The exception is municipal youth council in Telšiai, where students' organisations have their representatives). Thus, young adults are misrepresented in local youth councils. One focus group participant has reflected on this issue as a common problem and concern for all the municipalities. It has been explained that youth political leaders (mainly youth council members and some volunteers in open youth centers) are leaving small and medium-sized cities for studies after the finishing school (*Focus group; Køge 1; Elbląg 1 Individual interview 13*).

The research reveals a lot of common patterns between the youth councils and open youth centres, but there are apparent differences in relations to municipalities and political engagement.

Municipal youth councils. As the research data suggests, political participation in the form of municipal youth councils is one of the main mechanisms for young people to engage at the local level. These institutions (they have quasi formal status) advise, consult and cooperate with municipal councils and administrative institutions. The distinguished form of youth council is generally continuing connections with municipality or affiliated institutions (municipal agencies, services centres, etc.). As the interview with stakeholders reveals, young people interest in government decision making processes and local community governance can be promoted and they can receive support for their own initiatives⁴⁷. Youth councils' relationships with local government institutions are based on a formal relationship with a structured process. (Focus group; Køge 1, Elbląg 1).

⁴⁷ HORGAN, Deirdre. Consultations with children and young people and their impact on policy in Ireland. 2017, pp. 106-107; MUNIGLIA, Virginie, et al. The analysis of youth participation in contemporary literature: A European perspective. Youth participation in Europe: Beyond discourses, practices and realities, 2012, p. 5.

Youth council members are often understood as experts on youth issues and policies⁴⁸. The expertise is concentrated under the national umbrella organisations which support national networks and coordinate actions (*Focus group; Køge 1; Individual interview 22; 26*). On the other hand, youth councils have strong cooperation with other bodies (school councils, youth NGO, community organisations etc).

The politicians, qualitatively interviewed participants, remarked a lot of positive experiences regarding partnership relationship with youth councils, mostly reflecting on their main roles in the representation of youth as the target group (*Focus group, Elblåg 1; Individual interview 6, 11, 12*). They have also emphasised the involvement in civic projects and teaching democracy (*Focus group; Køge 1, Elblåg 1*). In some interviews, politicians have mentioned the phenomenon of tokenism in regard to local youth councils and also pointed out the problem of over-engagement by some youth workers. As one city mayor have summarised:

Sometimes ideas about the issues or change do not come from the youth. That is the truth....
(Individual interview 6).

The criticism about constrained participation and misrepresentation was related to the politization (youth council members are used for political interests by ruling parties or opposition during election periods) of some youth councils (Individual interview 10, 12). A

The qualitative research data provides evidence that the process of political engagement is very structured and covers established formal procedures consultations (agenda setting for special meetings with mayors or top administrators or voicing concerns in municipal councils or committee meetings). These formal adult-led processes have a lot of benefits and some shortcomings. Over-formalised procedures and bureaucratic style have been generally seen as the real problem:

If the meetings [with the powerful people in the local government] are official, formalistic, they are a bit pompous, but we also meet unofficially. [...] Yes, we have dealt with a lot of things for several years. Shall I list a few examples? For example, we had a lot of problems with suicide attempts among young people. And then the young people said that psychological services offered to young people do not satisfy the need. The government was too prudent about providing the supportive psychological services the youth needed. And we had made a big campaign by putting pressure on the local authorities and by using different means. And it ended successfully. A full-time psychologist was recruited. This was the example when we have directly influenced decisions. (Individual interview 1)

⁴⁸ TAFT, Jessica K.; GORDON, Hava R. Youth activists, youth councils, and constrained democracy. Education, *Citizenship and Social Justice*, 2013, 8.1, p. 91.

The interview participant has explained how they (youth council members with the help of youth worker) have changed formal consultations by using informal meetings and some forms of protests. It is important to notice that the young people's campaign has influenced the change of the policy decisions. This exemplifies the ultimate aim of the engagement related to the empowerment of young people.

Considering the municipal youth councils' members, it could be noticed that the participation is valuable for them. Interview reveals that youth councils' members have benefits in forms of civic and political socialisation as well as personal skills and a career development (valued as "something for the CV", *Focus group, Elblåg 2*).

Municipal youth centres. Besides youth councils (and similar organisations like youth commissions, advisory boards, etc.) there are numerous organisational platforms for youth civic participation and youth socialisation. These organisations are affiliated with municipality in forms of financial and administrative assistance or owned and controlled by them. Some political sociologists name these organisations as civil society organisations following social capital theory approach⁴⁹. It is also important to note that youth organisations relationship between political participation and civic engagement forms an unquestionable connection in various academic research fields.

As the interview reveals, most of municipalities have open centres as platforms (*Focus group; Køge 1, Elblåg 1*). The main features of the organisational variety are formal or informal memberships (voluntary basis), voluntarism and activities oriented to civic socialisation. These organisations are working outside the schools. Most of open youth centres are working on the development of civic skills, but some of them are providing services to youth. The youth are building trust with community and social networks in these organisations. It is important to notice, that some of skills developed in the centres are relevant for youth political participation (*Focus group; Køge 1, Elblåg 1*). Thus, it is possible to claim that these organisations often serve youth as "schools of local democracy and civic engagement". On the other hand, these centres more often function as the spaces for youth leisure activities.

Empirical studies done in European context prove that adolescent associational membership correlates with a higher level of political engagement in adulthood⁵⁰. But there is

⁴⁹ BAGGETTA, Matthew; BREDEKAMP, David M. Systematic Social Observation in the Study of Civil Society Organizations. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 2019, p. 1-2.

⁵⁰ VAN DER MEER, Tom WG; VAN INGEN, Erik J. Schools of democracy? Disentangling the relationship between civic participation and political action in 17 European countries. *European Journal of Political*

a new tendency. Longitudinal Gema G. Albacete research reveals that institutional socialisation (in forms of volunteering, membership in NGO) is less effective for political participations of the 21st century young people generation compared with the generation of their parents. On the other hand, it depends on country-specific political context and socialisation systems⁵¹.

Getting back to the qualitative research data it is possible to note some criticism in regard to such centres:

We do know a lot about the youth centre. [...] I know that they are teaching guitar play. I know that there is possibility to play table tennis. Actually, only small group of people are engaged in their activities. [...] It would be good if it was a kind of open space for young people. It would be nice to have a space for playing table tennis, billiard or having the coffee for a cheap price. [...] (participant 1) I have reservations about it. I guess there would be many volunteers going to this centre if it would be open for all. Oh the other hand, it would be necessary to have a lot of marketing, special invitations, attractive activities. I guess it would be popular among proactive youth. (Focus group, Elbląg 2).

The criticism of the over emphasis of targeted youth services is evident in this interview episode. The interview participant has also brought up strong arguments about the conflicting youth identities in social spaces. Social context factors (youth culture, life styles, social status, disability etc.) are important determinants for the group identity within the space of the socialisation. According to sociological research, the youth with different social identities faces individual challenges and sometimes they need socialisation process that supports youth⁵².

Another interview participant was less critical about activities of this open youth centre. He has pointed out the high needs' services to socially sensitive target groups. It has also been mentioned that this centre is not literally open to all of youth as it could be mistakenly understood (*Individual interview 10*). At the same time, arguments about the choice and the accessibility for the youth with special needs, as well as the high quality of services provided by youth workers have been addressed.

The group interview participants have discussed the problem of 'openness' of such centres. Some of them (mainly from Poland and Lithuania) have argued that this is the

Research, 2009, 48.2, pp. 301-302; NIEUWELINK, Hessel, et al. Adolescents' experiences with democracy and collective decision-making in everyday life. Political engagement of the young in Europe. Youth in the crucible, 2016, 174-198; ALBACETE, Gema Garcia. Young people's political participation in Western Europe: Continuity or generational change?. Springer, 2014, pp. 162-165.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 222.

⁵² ABBOTT-CHAPMAN, Joan; ROBERTSON, Margaret. Youth leisure, places, spaces and identity. In: Landscapes of leisure. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015. p. 123-134; ROBERTSON, Margaret, et al. Leisure geographies of young people: cross-cultural perspectives. In: Regional Conference of the International Geographical Union and Commission on Geographical Education Proceedings. 2002.

proper approach in the light of youth policies and support provided by the local or the national government. One participant has reflected on several aspects:

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These centres have specific social nature. They are minimising the risk of exclusion. Actually, the idea is that some youth groups could be socially and culturally included and they would follow directions that they want. It happens that these centres restrict the participation of other youth groups. They are narrowly focused on leisure-times for socially excluded people. I think that it is a good approach (Focus group, Elblåg 1).

The participants of the Danish and Swedish group interviews have provided different arguments. They have brought up the acceptance of open spaces (special facilities, etc.) and added new the value of relationships with youth workers, special youth services, cultural, sport and unstructured leisure-time activities etc. (*Focus group; Køge 1, Elblåg 1*) The interview participants have also stressed the importance of the enhanced involvement, work with youth according to equality principles and the creation of supportive relationships.

In Sweden, it is more important to engage everyone. It is a very, very important question. We also work a lot to realise the equality of rights of women and men and to make members of the society equal. That is that we are beginning to realise as the goal and are very good at Sweden (Individual interview 13).

The participants from Denmark and Sweden have discussed alcohol policies in youth centres. Respondents from Sweden have emphasised that they are focused on health-promoting settings and have no-alcohol rule for young people in their centre. On the other hand, one youth worker from Denmark has noted, that young people aged 18 and over (legal age for alcohol consumption in Denmark) can buy beer (with strong verification of age) in a coffee bar working in the local youth centre. It has been discussed in the interview that such decisions depend on different aims of national or institutional policies focused on changes of youth behaviour patterns. In youth centres affiliated to Swedish municipalities, adults have intended to minimise risk-taking youth behaviour and create healthy environment. Meanwhile, in Danish municipal youth centres, youth workers have aimed to include a broader range of local youth groups and even this would require a permission of potentially harmful risk-taking behaviour. It was stressed in the interview, that alcohol consumption is controlled and youth presence is supervised by adult youth workers.

The role of the engagement in culture or civic-political culture has been discussed in the focus group. All participants have agreed that all the municipalities have diverse repertoires of young people engagement with different institutional models, political and civic socialisation systems and identities. Participants have also agreed that it is difficult to find common patters in the political youth engagement (Focus group, Køge 1; Focus group,

Elbląg 1). On the other hand, it was agreed that youth participation is strongly influenced by the political engagement culture of a particular country. The participants from Denmark and Sweden have found some similarities between civic and political education and forms of policies municipalities provides (Focus group; Køge 1). However, in regard to youth engagement practices in Polish and Danish municipalities, they have noticed very different cultural patterns while comparing them to Scandinavian ones (Focus group, Køge 1).

The qualitative research data indicates that youth engaged in civic doings live very lively. The interview participants have pointed out that for some young people it is difficult to balance the participation in youth councils or in youth centres with the school and other extra-curricular activities (Individual interview 7). Young leaders find it difficult to balance activities between Køge city youth council, schools' student councils and sport training or cultural events.

Because there are so many things on offer in Køge. The youth have young political parties, sports clubs and lots and lots of things. So, what youth council can have on top of that? (Focus group; Køge 1).

During interviews, it has been discussed that a high-level youth political and civic engagement is the result of Danish Youth policy (Individual interview 7). Danish government, municipalities and affiliated organisations promote the political participation, engagement and civic education. Youth engagement in organisations has been mentioned by research participants as a critical factor for strengthening local democracy. It was pointed out that youth active engagement in organisations leads to the higher participation in local elections.

Discussion and conclusion

According to the series of research, political participation and engagement of young Europeans have different forms and approaches⁵³. Another tendency, the young people participate less in elections or other traditional forms (membership in parties) and are more engaged in public policy (structured participation through institutional channels) or public activism.⁵⁴ At the same time, young people are disengaged from local politics and even

⁵³ ALBACETE, Gema Garcia. Young people's political participation in Western Europe: Continuity or generational change?. Springer, 2014; SLOAM, James. Diversity and voice: The political participation of young people in the European Union. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2016, 18.3: 521-537.

⁵⁴ SOLER-I-MARTÍ, Roger; FERRER-FONS, Mariona. Youth participation in context: the impact of youth transition regimes on political action strategies in Europe. *The Sociological Review*, 2015, 63: 92-117; VALKERING, Anne, et al. It's More than Just Debating: The Political Participation and Democratic Attitudes of Debate Programme Participants in Seven "New" Democracies. *Sociální studia/Social Studies*, 2019, 15.2, pp.

apathetic. This study has explored approaches to the youth participation in finding the main barriers, incentives and driving factors for the youth structured engagement at the municipal level in four countries.

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The main barriers to youth political engagement. During this study a wide range of barriers for youth political engagement and activities which youth councils are engaged have been identified. Firstly, the study participants supported a broad spectrum of approaches for involving in municipal government. They varied depending on the country and municipalities. Danish and Swedish municipalities used broad-based and diversified approaches for the communication and consultations with youth (including municipal youth council members or leaders open youth centres). Mainly it takes a top-down approach, but it also combines a voluntary bottom-up approach with the guidance of youth workers, multi-structured engagement process responds to the needs of youth (they are designed with the purpose or problem situations) and municipality (satisfies the interest to consult the youth). In Sweden and Denmark, the youth play the role of ambassadors in the decision making of the local government. These practices are consistent with the youth-centric approach. Some Polish and Lithuanian municipal governments had taken the path for the cooperation with the youth councils and other organisations based on ‘a formal framework’. In the present study, it has been identified, that this approach is not always responsive and attractive for youth engaged in political process. The interview participants have recalled the need for the bottom-up approach for consultations between youth councils and municipalities. These practices are consistent with the adult-centric approach. It is also important to stress that the local context has significantly influenced relationships between municipal institutions and organised youth. According Mary Elizabeth Collins, this model is “heavily state-centered” [...] and presumes the neutrality of the state, and believes that diverse interests – including those of youth – are sufficiently represented in the democratic process⁵⁵. The studies of the youth structured engagement in municipalities demonstrates that this model finds distrust and criticism among some youth⁵⁶.

The findings in this research related to the barriers of youth engagement are relevant to other researches. Firstly, there are gaps in the youth (stakeholders – youth

35-53; KITANOVA, Magdalena. Youth political participation in the EU: evidence from a cross-national analysis. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2019, pp. 1-18.

⁵⁵ COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; AUGSBERGER, Astraea; GECKER, Whitney. Youth councils in municipal government: Examination of activities, impact and barriers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 65: 140-147.

⁵⁶ TAFT, Jessica K.; GORDON, Hava R. Youth activists, youth councils, and constrained democracy. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 2013, 8.1: 87-100; RÖNNLUND, Maria. Justice in and through education? Students' participation in decision-making. *JSSE-Journal of Social Science Education*, 2014.

conciators)– adult partnership⁵⁷. The current study found similar criticism towards structured (formal, institutionalised) political engagement processes (in Polish, Lithuanian and Danish municipalities). On the other hand, the analysis reveals supportive attitudes grounded on experience and strong arguments. The Anna-Britt Coe concept of youth political actions as consisting of the multiple processes makes it possible to circumvent dichotomy of structured vs unstructured participation. The present research reveals, young people construct political or civic actions by taking other participatory forms (protest on the street, complaints to the relevant authorities, etc).

The interview data analysis reveals that the youth political and civic engagement has some communicative barriers which are based on the inflexible nature of formal processes (Lithuanian and Polish municipalities) and the lack of knowledge about public policies and bureaucratic language used in municipalities. In Swedish and Danish municipalities, the agenda for consultations are relevant to youth needs or expectations. Therefore, there are only some minimal gaps in the communication and they are solved by introducing tools which are more appropriate for young people and are related to the electronic communication. These findings are relevant to the extensive research about youth – adults partnering difficulties. The involvement (and power of influence) of youth councils in the policy formation is limited by the paperwork and formal procedures⁵⁹. Failure to understand regulations and procedures gives rise to the disillusionment in local politics and a sense of marginalisation as a group⁶⁰.

The broad academic research and the present study reveals that some communicative gaps in youth – adult political relationships can be filled by changing culture (from adult-centric, formalistic values, organisational climate, communication styles to youth-centric based on democratic values, plain language, etc.) development projects (youth friendly citizen development programs, teaching participatory budgeting, role playing

⁵⁷ Ibid, NIR, Tal; PERRY-HAZAN, Lotem. The framed right to participate in municipal youth councils and its educational impact. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 69: 174-183; COE, Anna-Britt, et al. Youth politics as multiple processes: How teenagers construct political action in Sweden. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2016, 19.10: 1321-1337..

⁵⁸ Anna-Britt Coe

⁵⁹ BOOKER, Angela. Contingent authority and youth influence: When youth councils can wield influence in public institutions. *Revista de Investigación Educativa*, 2017, 35.2: 537-562; HAVLICEK, Judy; LIN, Ching-Hsuan; BRAUN, Michael T. Cultivating youth voice through participation in a Foster youth advisory board: Perspectives of facilitators. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 69: 1-10.

⁶⁰ MATTHEWS, Hugh; LIMB, Melanie. Another white elephant? Youth councils as democratic structures. *Space and Polity*, 2003, 7.2: 173-192; PERCY-SMITH, Barry. Councils, consultations and community: Rethinking the spaces for children and young people's participation. *Children's Geographies*, 2010, 8.2: 107-122.

teaching seminars about ‘rules of the political game’). Some Polish and Danish youth workers have facilitated local youth councils’ members by using different effective and youth – friendly models (special guidance forms, special ‘spaces’ for participation) for interactions with municipal politicians and public administrators. The stakeholders have expressed their concern related to the impact of youth on the municipal government decisions. They have argued that structured political participation gives an opportunity for youth to be voiced, but without the empowerment.

The most effective forms for youth engagement. Most of the research on youth engagement organisations (youth councils or civic engagement organisations) are case studies or limited regional studies⁶¹. This study of a number of councils and open youth centres within four countries expands the empirical literature. Furthermore, this study compares a number of youth organisations affiliated with municipalities providing a variety of youth engagement into political practices and problems related to it. During this analysis it has been identified that organisations for the youth engagement operated in very different local frameworks with a specific institutional/organisational, political and cultural environment. These environments have not always been friendly for youth engagement and development. The study has found that all organisations for youth political and civic engagement are adult led. The local context and national cultural, educational patterns are essentially influenced the activities, organisations and status of the councils. In the study, it is argued that there is a need to deepen conceptual understanding and get more empirical data about the forms of political participation in different countries at local level. Future studies should try to clarify why national and local variations exist. This study offers only a basis for the more detailed research on the participatory processes at national and local accumulate scientific evidence, for youth policies and best fit model for structured youth participation (see ⁶²) in context of concrete municipality. It could be argued that municipalities should take the youth-centric approach for working with youth (see ⁶³). In this regard, it is necessary to create or strengthen the collaborative climate, establish a welcoming friendly environment, simplify bureaucratic procedures and use plain language for the communication.

⁶¹ AUGSBERGER, Astraea; COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; GECKER, Whitney. Engaging Youth in Municipal Government: Moving Toward a Youth-Centric Practice. *Journal of Community Practice*, 2018, 26.1, pp. 41-62; COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; AUGSBERGER, Astraea; GECKER, Whitney. Youth councils in municipal government: Examination of activities, impact and barriers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 65: 140-147.

⁶² NIR, Tal; PERRY-HAZAN, Lotem. The framed right to participate in municipal youth councils and its educational impact. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2016, 69: 174-183.

⁶³ AUGSBERGER, Astraea; COLLINS, Mary Elizabeth; GECKER, Whitney. Engaging Youth in Municipal Government: Moving Toward a Youth-Centric Practice. *Journal of Community Practice*, 2018, 26.1: 41-62.

Study limitations. The study limitations are related to the research object and the comparative methodological approach. The comparison of organisations in different countries could be understood as both a study strength and a big limitation. Firstly, researchers had been invited to participate in qualitative research by representing their municipalities and countries. However, this does not mean that collected research data fully represents all the youth participatory practises and problems. In addition, the results of the research of the comparison of two different types of organisations i.e. municipal youth councils and open youth centres should be done cautiously. In the beginning, it was conceptualised that different youth organisations affiliated with a municipality can be perceived as a framework (institutional form) for the youth political and civic engagement. The conceptualisation about the youth political participation⁶⁴ and the engagement was taken from Gema M. Garcia-Albacete. It was done for several reasons. The broad definition reflects different forms of participation and young people actions. Secondly, complex and multidimensional concepts provide a possibility to observe actions (some civic or cultural activities) which would not be directly related to the ‘conventional’ participation. Future research could take advantage of the analysis of the youth perspectives.

⁶⁴ ALBACETE, Gema Garcia. Young people's political participation in Western Europe: Continuity or generational change?. Springer, 2014, p. 18.