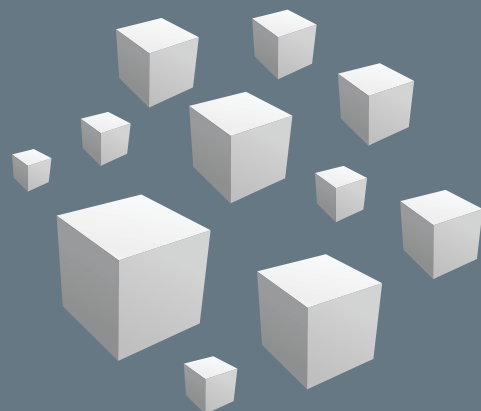


# YOUTH IN POLITICS



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This article is supported by:

Democratic Society Promotion (DSP) – financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark (DANIDA) and managed by the Kosovo Civil Society Foundation (KCSF).

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## YOUTH IN POLITICS

Democracy cannot be complete without inclusion of youth and women; both need to be an important part of the decision-making process. In Kosovo, youth are considered a source of political force. They represent more than half of the population and make up a considerable part of the electorate. However, their inclusion in decision-making and policy-planning processes remains very limited. Politics continues to be considered as an exclusive domain for strong and experienced men to wield power. Youth's contribution is confined to electoral campaigns and rallies. Despite their will, youth remain outside the political debate processes, with no access to decision-making, and with very limited chances for participation in capacity development programs and practical experience.

Political parties have reduced space dedicated to youth and women into a form of party forums; respectively in the forum for youth and the forum of women.<sup>1</sup> Forums are conceived as structures that will ease inclusion of youth and women into the decision-making process. The majority of political parties have defined internal structures, with wide geographical coverage throughout the country. However, these networked structures, supplied with basic regulations and procedures, do not provide a sufficient space for the genuine involvement of youth in the decision-making process. At large, they are marginalised because of their age, limited opportunities and lack of experience.

At first glance, gender representation in youth forums seems not to be an issue; women make up to 40 percent.<sup>2</sup> One of the forums until recently was led by a woman; whereas now none. Women continue, however, to face discriminatory practices within youth forums and their political parties. Women's political journeys and progress into politics are subject to barriers of patriarchal culture, present even within political parties.

Lack of trust in the political parties and institutions, corruption, inconsistency of ideas and limited space for a genuine engagement, make youth largely apathetic toward politics. Research shows that [73% of youth have never been engaged in any political party, this is due to lack of motivation and limited space](#). Only a limited number of young people (around 10%) see participation in politics as an opportunity to make

<sup>1</sup> Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (Movement for Self-determination) has no forums for youth or women, reasoning that all members are equal and all are assessed on the basis of contributions within the movement.

<sup>2</sup> Balkans Group's workshops, organised in December 2017.

change. That opportunity is mostly perceived as engaging in political parties, namely within youth structures.

In 2017, Balkans Group conducted research and held workshops with the members of youth forums, with the aim to understand the processes and challenges the youth in politics faces. The research found that reasons why youth engage in politics are numerous, including the need for the space and support of ideas, preferences [toward certain political personalities](#), opportunities and hopes for change, representation, the difficult economic situation and education. *“Activism within youth forums is the only way to contribute to decision-making and change of the situation, as it offers the opportunity for becoming part of the larger processes and agendas”*, was, among others, highlighted in the workshops held with the youth.

The majority of young people see their engagement with youth forums as the only possibility to engage in policy changes. Other opportunities remain quite limited, while inadequate qualifications prevent many from engaging in other forms that could contribute to real social change.

A considerable number of young people believe that by joint the youth forums, chances to involve in the decision-making processes, or concretely running for elections are more realistic. For some others, including young people already engaged in politics, youth forums serve only as an 'entrance ticket' to employment with public institutions, particularly the government.

### **Youth forums: what's their offer and what's being offered?**

Youth and their party forums are often marginalised, seen as little relevant; this discourages many young boys and girls to join the political party or actively participate in the forums. The role of these youth structures remains symbolic, because all key decisions are made by the senior party members.

Often, young people within these forums are being prejudiced because of their age. They are being excluded from the decision-making processes, as well as from other important agendas at local and national levels. The belief is that the mentality inside the parties suggest that *being young means being incompetent*. In some cases, mid-level or senior party members were elected as head of youth forums, regardless the fact that his/her age provides limits.

The undefined age of young people quite often causes confusion about who is young and who is not. There is no uniformity about the age issue in the youth forums of the political parties, as a determining criterion for "youth" membership into their structures.<sup>3</sup> There is no clear definition whether biological or political life determines the term "youth in politics".

If someone from the civil society, media or other public areas, who by age often belongs to the majority of members of youth forums, joins a political party, he/she immediately becomes part of the key (high level) structures. This is not the case with a young student or recently graduated, who's neither known nor popular. They are required to first join a youth forum.

"The new comers" are automatically privileged and faced-tracked; it has become a trend. This phenomenon discourages young people inside or those who would potentially join the forums. Members of youth forums perceive this practice as unfair against their contribution. On the eve of any electoral process, the political parties invite and include important public figures, thus bypassing their existing structures. The latter quite often refer to the newcomers as 'the parachutists'; this best reflects their disappointment with the practice and lack of standards for membership and promotion.

The political parties, not the youth, design and determine the role of the forums. Their dependence-in many aspects- on their senior superiors (party leadership) make the forums less effective and leave them unconsolidated. Full inclusion of youth in the decision-making process is apparent only on issues exclusively linked to activities of youth forums. Political parties approve decisions, respectively activities, proposed at forums that do not affect overall party policies. Consequently, youth forum activities remain restricted to less relevant issues and activities; those include symbolic protests and actions, reading activities, film screenings, organisation of youth evenings and some humanitarian actions.

Supporting and promoting party leaders during election campaigns, in particular, are undoubtedly key activities of the youth forums. During election campaigns, members of youth forums are being used as carriers of party flags and distributors of posters and leaflets. The most loyal members, with the power to influence the electorate and earn votes, are the preferred and most favoured by the party.

<sup>3</sup> In PDK the age for membership in the youth forum is from 16 to 25 years, in Nimsa from 18 years, while AKR is up to 30 years.

Nepotism and political favours are present in youth forums too. Young members across the board complain that 'nepotism' is the main catalyst for promotion, even within the forums. This limits the space for critical thinking, debate, discourages a genuine intellectual engagement and education of youth, especially in the public policy sphere.

The youth forums also have their own troubles, which accurately reflect the way the overall entity functions. The heads or leaders of youth forums are extremely privileged compared to their colleagues. They're the only beneficiaries that eventually participate in important party meetings, participate or are delegated to take trainings, and have communication with partners inside and outside their parties. Numerous forum members complain that they are often limited by the leading structures of those forums.

Limited space for a critical approach and for participation in decision-making process is responsible for youth forums reproducing the mentality of their 'parent' political parties. In many aspects, youth members echo their party leaders. This, among other things, is reflected in their approach toward political opponents. Relations among youth forums, like those between political parties, are extremely polarised. Forums tend to cooperate with the coalition parties' forums. These partnerships are fragile, with the tendency to dissolve shortly after the disintegration of the coalition. Besides, this practice demonstrates the reluctance of forums to apply a more comprehensive and rational approach, which would, as a result, then challenge the positions and views within their parties.

The political parties did little - almost nothing - to develop, train and emancipate their young members. The only support, albeit a lot less than in other areas, has been provided by non-governmental organisations and donors. Young people within forums, who have absorbed a bit more knowledge, participated in various programmes from local NGOs, foundations and international organisations. Their number, however, remains small. And even those few trained failed to convey that knowledge to their colleagues.

Panellists of [the Balkan Group's Conference on Promoting and Empowering Youth in Politics](#) – the representatives of Kosovo's largest political parties, identified as *role models* by the youth forums, confirmed the challenges that young people in politics are facing.

Among many challenges, it was said that key obstacles to increasing the role of youth in politics are related to: 1) stereotypes towards their young age; 2) youth forum activism which occurs only during political campaigns, and where they are dictated to by the political parties and senior leaders; 3) lack of space for critical access or authentic contribution. In addition to a lack of knowledge, experience and access, the role of youth in decision-making and policy-making processes remain superficial to a large extent.

Even more disturbing is the fact that forums and youth structures of the political parties remain almost unknown to their party structures, to the broader public opinion, and other groups of interest, including donors. The majority of forums cannot be found publicly, there are no addresses, they have no active websites, or accessible organogram structures.

In order to change the current situation, to increase the role and participation of youth in policy-making processes and their role inside the parties:

The political parties need to update and design an advanced statutory definition of youth representation within the decision-making structures, including a radical increase of their participation.

The political parties must develop adequate practices for regular consultations with youth forums, regarding design of public policies, democratic functioning of political parties, integration processes, etc.

The political parties should organise public discussions with their structures, with regard to the political and government programmes and agendas.

The political parties need to develop training and development programmes for their youth structures.

The donors should consider a direct support for young people in politics and support the development programs of the parties - provided that their participation increases and democratic values of the party advance.

The youth forums should increase their role, i.e. set up a mechanism that will monitor their participation in policy-drafting within their parties, as well as in the implementation of policies and programmes of their parties, including through cooperating with independent nongovernmental and youth organisations outside their parties.

The youth forums should increase their public presence and visibility, develop activities outside of political parties, increase media presence, and establish a continuous public relations and access.





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Our rigorous, detailed, impartial reporting, always based on in-depth fieldwork, is the core of our work. We go beyond mainstream positions and seek to make change through creative, feasible, well-measured and forward-looking policy recommendations with the aim of helping develop strong, vibrant democracies, prosperous states and societies based on rule of law in the Western Balkans.

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Activity supported by the  
Canada Fund for Local Initiatives  
Activité réalisée avec l'appui du  
Fonds canadien d'initiatives locales

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