

Institutionalizing Youth Participation without Empowerment? Evidence from Albanian Municipalities _____

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Abstract

Youth participation has become an increasingly important component of democratic governance, particularly within frameworks promoting inclusive decision-making and civic engagement. In Albania, the adoption of Law No. 75/2019 “On Youth” established the first comprehensive legal framework aimed at strengthening youth participation through institutional mechanisms such as Local Youth Councils and municipal structures responsible for youth affairs. This article examines the extent to which these reforms have contributed to meaningful youth participation in local decision-making processes. Drawing on a mixed-methods research design, the study combines survey data from 207 young people aged 15–29 with semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 representatives from 22 Albanian municipalities. The analysis is informed by theories of participatory governance and youth empowerment, as well as Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation and Hart’s Ladder of Youth Participation. The findings indicate that Law No. 75/2019 has contributed significantly to the institutionalization of youth participation across Albanian municipalities through the establishment of formal participatory structures and consultation mechanisms. However, awareness of these opportunities

remains uneven, participation levels are relatively modest, and many young people perceive their influence on local policymaking as limited. While municipalities increasingly provide opportunities for consultation and dialogue, participation often remains advisory rather than decisional. Information deficits, limited political efficacy, uneven municipal capacities, and insufficient financial resources continue to constrain meaningful youth engagement. The article argues that the Albanian case illustrates a broader challenge facing transitional democracies: the creation of participatory institutions does not automatically generate empowerment or influence. Although youth participation has become increasingly institutionalized, the transition from formal inclusion to substantive participation remains incomplete. The study contributes to debates on participatory governance, youth empowerment, and democratic inclusion by highlighting the gap between institutional participation and meaningful influence in local governance.

Keywords: youth participation; participatory governance; youth empowerment; local governance; democratic inclusion; Local Youth Councils; Albania; Law No. 75/2019

Introduction

Youth participation in political and decision-making processes has become an increasingly important component of democratic governance. Young people are recognized not only as beneficiaries of public policies but also as active contributors to social, political, and economic development. Their involvement enhances democratic legitimacy, strengthens social inclusion, and improves the responsiveness of public institutions (Checkoway, 2011; Hart, 1992). Nevertheless, young people often encounter barriers that limit meaningful participation, including restricted access to decision-making structures, low levels of institutional trust, and limited opportunities to influence policy outcomes (OECD, 2001; United Nations, 2018).

International organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations have increasingly emphasized youth engagement as a key element of inclusive governance and sustainable development. Through frameworks such as the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the UN Youth 2030 Strategy, youth participation is promoted not only as a democratic right but also as a mechanism for strengthening accountability, social cohesion, and democratic resilience (European Commission, 2018; United Nations, 2018).

In Albania, youth participation gained greater institutional recognition with the adoption of Law No. 75/2019 “On Youth,” the first comprehensive legal framework dedicated specifically to youth governance. The law introduced

mechanisms intended to strengthen youth empowerment and participation, most notably through the establishment of Local Youth Councils and municipal structures responsible for youth affairs. These reforms reflect broader efforts to align Albanian youth policies with European and international standards of participatory governance.

However, the existence of participatory mechanisms does not necessarily guarantee meaningful participation. Research on participatory governance has consistently demonstrated that institutional structures may facilitate consultation without necessarily providing citizens with substantive influence over decision-making processes (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008). This challenge is particularly relevant in transitional democracies, where legal reforms often advance more rapidly than changes in institutional practices and political culture.

Against this backdrop, this study examines youth participation in local decision-making processes in Albania following the adoption of Law No. 75/2019. It explores young people's awareness of participatory mechanisms, their perceptions of influence in local governance, and the effectiveness of institutional structures designed to facilitate youth engagement. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines survey data from 207 young people with interviews conducted with representatives from 22 municipalities, the study evaluates the implementation of youth participation mechanisms at the local level.

The article argues that while Law No. 75/2019 has contributed significantly to the institutionalization of youth participation in Albania, the transition from formal participation to meaningful influence remains incomplete. Although municipalities have established participatory structures, young people continue to face informational, institutional, and empowerment-related barriers that limit their substantive role in local decision-making. By examining the Albanian case, this study contributes to broader debates on youth participation, participatory governance, and democratic inclusion in post-communist and transitional contexts.

Despite the growing body of literature on youth participation, participatory governance, and empowerment, limited research has examined the practical implementation of youth participation mechanisms introduced by Law No. 75/2019 in Albania. Existing studies have largely focused on youth policies, civic engagement, or political participation more broadly, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to assessing whether newly established institutional structures have translated into meaningful youth influence at the local level. This study addresses that gap by providing one of the first empirical assessments of the implementation of Law No. 75/2019 through a mixed-methods analysis combining youth perspectives and institutional experiences across Albanian municipalities. By examining the relationship between formal participatory structures and actual influence in local governance, the article contributes to broader debates

on participatory governance, youth empowerment, and democratic inclusion in transitional and post-communist contexts.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Participation, Youth Engagement, and Democratic Governance

Youth participation in political and decision-making processes has become an increasingly important topic in contemporary democratic governance literature. Participation is generally understood as the active involvement of individuals and social groups in shaping decisions that affect their lives, communities, and broader social environments. Within youth studies, participation extends beyond electoral engagement to include involvement in policymaking, public consultations, civic activism, community initiatives, and institutional governance structures (Checkoway, 2011).

The literature distinguishes between formal and informal forms of participation. Formal participation encompasses institutionalized mechanisms such as youth councils, consultative bodies, and local governance structures, whereas informal participation includes protests, social movements, online activism, and community mobilization (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Contemporary research suggests that young people increasingly prefer flexible, issue-oriented forms of engagement over traditional political participation, particularly in transitional and post-communist contexts characterized by lower levels of institutional trust (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

Participation is widely regarded as a fundamental component of democratic governance, contributing to accountability, legitimacy, and policy responsiveness. According to Chetwynd and Chetwynd (2001), effective participation depends on transparent governance, continuous communication between institutions and citizens, and mechanisms that enable citizens to engage as active actors in public affairs. Similarly, participatory and deliberative democratic theories emphasize that democratic systems function more effectively when citizens are actively involved in public decision-making processes (Pateman, 1970; Habermas, 1996). For young people, participation also plays an important role in political socialization, civic learning, and the development of democratic citizenship (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

Understanding the quality of participation requires analytical frameworks capable of distinguishing between symbolic inclusion and meaningful influence. One of the most influential contributions in this regard is Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, which conceptualizes participation as a continuum ranging from non-participation and tokenism to genuine citizen power. Arnstein

argues that participation becomes meaningful only when citizens are able to influence decisions rather than merely being consulted, making the framework particularly useful for assessing whether participatory mechanisms generate substantive influence or simply create the appearance of inclusion.

Building on Arnstein's work, Hart (1992) developed the Ladder of Youth Participation, adapting participation theory specifically to young people's involvement in governance. Hart distinguishes between tokenistic forms of participation and genuine engagement, where young people are informed, consulted, involved in shared decision-making, and ultimately able to initiate and lead participatory processes. The model highlights the importance of recognizing young people as capable social and political actors rather than passive recipients of public policy.

Complementing these theoretical perspectives, the OECD (2001) identifies three levels of interaction between institutions and citizens: information, consultation, and active participation. This framework provides a useful operational tool for assessing the extent to which participatory mechanisms move beyond information sharing and consultation toward genuine influence in policymaking.

At the international level, youth participation has increasingly been promoted as both a democratic right and a governance priority. The United Nations and the European Union have advanced this agenda through initiatives such as the Youth 2030 Strategy and the EU Youth Strategy, emphasizing the role of young people in democratic governance, social inclusion, and sustainable development (European Commission, 2018; United Nations, 2018). Despite this growing recognition, research continues to identify significant barriers to youth engagement, including socioeconomic inequalities, limited institutional access, weak political representation, and low trust in public institutions (UNDP, 2012).

These challenges are also evident in Albania. Although reforms such as Law No. 75/2019 "On Youth" have strengthened the institutional framework for youth participation, questions remain regarding the extent to which these mechanisms generate meaningful influence at the local level. Drawing primarily on Arnstein's (1969) and Hart's (1992) models, this study evaluates whether the participation mechanisms established under the law facilitate substantive youth engagement in local governance or whether participation remains largely consultative and symbolic.

Concepts of Decision-Making and Youth Empowerment: Relevant Theories and Models

Participation in decision-making refers to the ability of individuals and social groups to influence the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policies. In youth studies, participation is closely associated with empowerment,

which emphasizes young people's capacity to exercise agency, influence institutions, and contribute to public life.

This study draws on two closely related concepts: participatory governance and youth empowerment. Participatory governance refers to governance arrangements that enable citizens to engage directly in policymaking and public decision-making processes. According to Fung and Wright (2003), it strengthens democratic legitimacy by creating institutional spaces for deliberation, collaboration, and citizen influence. Such approaches are typically associated with decentralization, transparency, consultation, and cooperation between public institutions and local communities.

Applied to youth participation, participatory governance promotes the inclusion of young people in local governance through mechanisms such as youth councils, public consultations, and community forums. These structures are intended not only to amplify youth voices but also to facilitate their active involvement in shaping policies and community development. In this sense, participatory governance challenges traditional top-down decision-making by encouraging more inclusive and collaborative democratic practices.

Closely connected to participatory governance is the theory of empowerment. Rappaport (1981) defines empowerment as a process through which individuals and communities gain greater control over decisions and resources affecting their lives. Empowerment theory highlights the importance of participation, access to resources, knowledge, and institutional opportunities in enabling marginalized or underrepresented groups to exercise influence within society. Zimmerman (1995) further conceptualizes empowerment through psychological, organizational, and community dimensions, emphasizing both individual capacities and structural opportunities for participation.

Applied to youth participation, empowerment refers to the process of equipping young people with the skills, knowledge, confidence, and institutional access necessary for effective engagement in governance and public decision-making. This includes civic education, leadership development, access to participatory platforms, and opportunities to engage with public institutions. Mechanisms such as Local Youth Councils (KVR), the National Youth Council (KKR), public consultations, and youth-oriented civic initiatives can therefore function as instruments of empowerment when they facilitate meaningful participation rather than symbolic inclusion.

The literature on youth empowerment also stresses the importance of creating supportive institutional environments in which young people perceive themselves as capable political and social actors. Effective participation requires institutions to reduce structural barriers such as unequal power relations, exclusionary political practices, limited access to information, and low levels of institutional trust. In many transitional democracies, these barriers continue to limit the substantive

influence of young people in governance processes despite the existence of formal participatory mechanisms.

From this perspective, meaningful youth participation depends not only on the formal existence of participatory structures, but also on the extent to which young people are genuinely able to influence outcomes and policymaking processes. As Cornwall (2008) argues, invited spaces of participation often risk becoming symbolic unless citizens possess real opportunities to shape decisions. Consequently, assessing youth participation requires attention both to institutional frameworks and to the actual distribution of influence and decision-making power within governance processes.

Participatory governance and empowerment are therefore deeply interconnected. Both approaches emphasize the need to move beyond passive models of citizenship by recognizing young people as active contributors to democratic life and community development.

International Frameworks: European Union and United Nations Perspectives on Youth Engagement

International organizations have played a significant role in promoting youth participation as a key component of democratic governance, social inclusion, and sustainable development. Among the most influential frameworks are those developed by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), which emphasize the importance of involving young people in public decision-making and policymaking processes.

The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 is built around three interconnected pillars—engagement, connection, and empowerment—and seeks to strengthen young people’s participation in democratic life, support mobility and cooperation, and enhance their skills and opportunities through education and training (European Commission, 2018). A central feature of the strategy is the promotion of structured dialogue between young people and policymakers through mechanisms such as youth councils, consultation processes, and participatory forums.

Similarly, the United Nations promotes youth participation through its Youth 2030 Strategy, which links youth engagement to inclusive governance, sustainable development, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, SDG 16 emphasizes the importance of inclusive and participatory institutions, while the Youth, Peace and Security agenda recognizes young people as active contributors to peacebuilding, civic engagement, and social resilience (United Nations, 2018).

Both the EU and the UN emphasize that effective youth participation requires more than formal consultation. Meaningful engagement depends on creating institutional spaces where young people can contribute to policymaking and

exercise genuine influence over decisions affecting their communities. As a candidate country for EU membership, Albania has increasingly aligned its youth policies with these international standards, most notably through the adoption of Law No. 75/2019 “On Youth.” These frameworks therefore provide an important normative benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of youth participation mechanisms in Albania.

Legal and Institutional Framework of Youth Participation in Albania Law No. 75/2019 “On Youth” and the Institutional Framework for Participation

The adoption of Law No. 75/2019 “On Youth” established the first comprehensive legal framework regulating youth policy and participation in Albania. The law aims to strengthen the inclusion of young people in public, political, and social life while aligning domestic youth policies with European Union and United Nations standards on participation and empowerment.

The legislation is built upon principles of equality, non-discrimination, equal opportunities, non-formal education, and structured dialogue between young people and public institutions. Its primary objective is to create institutional channels through which young people can engage in policymaking and public affairs at both national and local levels. In this regard, youth participation is framed not only as a civic right but also as a component of democratic governance and local development.

The law defines the responsibilities of national and local authorities in implementing youth policies. While the ministry responsible for youth coordinates and monitors national policy, consultative bodies such as the National Youth Council (KKR) and Local Youth Councils (KVR) serve as the main institutional platforms for youth engagement. However, as participation literature suggests, the existence of formal structures does not necessarily translate into meaningful influence, making implementation and institutional commitment critical factors in determining their effectiveness.

National Youth Strategy 2022–2029

The National Youth Strategy 2022–2029 serves as Albania’s principal policy framework for youth development. It links youth participation to broader objectives including education, employment, social inclusion, wellbeing, innovation, and sustainable development. Among its priorities are strengthening youth representation in governance, promoting active citizenship, supporting entrepreneurship, and expanding access to educational and social opportunities.

The strategy reflects strong alignment with the EU Youth Strategy and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, positioning youth participation

within Albania's broader democratic consolidation and European integration agenda. Nevertheless, its implementation depends largely on local institutional capacities, inter-institutional coordination, sustainable funding, and the effective functioning of participatory mechanisms.

Institutional Mechanisms: National and Local Youth Councils

A central feature of Albania's youth governance framework is the establishment of formal mechanisms for dialogue between young people and public institutions. At the national level, the National Youth Council (KKR) functions as a consultative body that provides recommendations on youth policies, contributes to the implementation of the National Youth Strategy, and facilitates communication between youth organizations and public authorities.

At the local level, Local Youth Councils (KVRs) constitute the primary mechanism for youth participation in municipal affairs. Established in all 61 municipalities, they are intended to provide a platform through which young people can contribute to local policymaking, propose initiatives, and communicate community concerns to local authorities.

The establishment of KVRs represents an important step toward institutionalizing youth participation at the local level. However, their role remains largely consultative, and their capacity to influence municipal decision-making varies considerably across municipalities. Factors such as political support, administrative capacity, available resources, and levels of youth engagement significantly affect their effectiveness. Consequently, the key question is not whether these mechanisms exist, but whether they provide young people with meaningful opportunities to influence public decisions rather than merely participate in consultation processes.

Methodology

This study examines the extent to which Law No. 75/2019 "On Youth" has contributed to the inclusion of young people in local decision-making processes in Albania. More specifically, it investigates whether the institutional mechanisms introduced by the law have generated meaningful opportunities for youth participation at the municipal level.

The central research question guiding the study is: *How has youth participation in local decision-making evolved in Albania following the adoption of Law No. 75/2019 "On Youth"?*

To address this question, the study pursues three main objectives. First, it evaluates the level of youth participation in local governance structures and decision-making processes after the adoption of the law. Second, it analyzes young

people's awareness of participatory mechanisms and their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of local institutions in facilitating youth engagement. Third, it examines the implementation of youth participation mechanisms at the municipal level, with particular attention to the role of local authorities and civil society actors in promoting participatory governance.

Research Design

To address the research question, this study employs a mixed-methods research design to examine youth participation in local decision-making processes in Albania following the implementation of Law No. 75/2019 "On Youth." The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods enables a comprehensive examination of both patterns of youth participation and the institutional dynamics shaping participatory practices at the local level.

The choice of a mixed-methods approach reflects the multidimensional nature of youth participation as both a social and institutional phenomenon. Quantitative methods make it possible to identify broader participation patterns, levels of institutional awareness, and demographic trends among young people, while qualitative methods provide deeper insights into institutional practices, implementation challenges, and perceptions of the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms. The integration of these approaches strengthens the validity of the findings through methodological triangulation (Bryman, 2016).

The study focuses on youth participation within local governance structures established following the adoption of Law No. 75/2019, paying particular attention to the functioning of Local Youth Councils, cooperation between local institutions and young people, participatory opportunities offered by municipalities, and perceptions of youth influence in local decision-making.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey and semi-structured interviews in order to capture both youth perspectives and institutional experiences.

The quantitative component consisted of an online survey administered to young people aged 15–29 across Albania. A total of 207 respondents participated. The questionnaire was designed to assess levels of participation in local decision-making, awareness of participatory mechanisms, perceptions of local government responsiveness, and barriers to youth engagement. It included a combination of multiple-choice, scaled-response, and open-ended questions, allowing both quantitative measurement and limited qualitative input.

The survey was distributed through social media platforms, email communication, and youth organization networks operating across different

municipalities. The online format facilitated participation from geographically diverse respondents, including young people living in rural and remote areas that are often underrepresented in traditional survey research.

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with individuals directly involved in the implementation of youth participation mechanisms at the municipal level. Participants included representatives of municipal youth sectors, Local Youth Councils, and other actors engaged in local youth governance. In total, 24 representatives from 22 municipalities were interviewed.

The interviews explored the implementation of Law No. 75/2019, the functioning of Local Youth Councils, institutional cooperation, financial and administrative support for youth initiatives, and the challenges associated with youth participation at the local level. The semi-structured format provided flexibility for participants to discuss local experiences and institutional realities while ensuring consistency across the main themes relevant to the research objectives.

Sampling

The study employed a structured sampling strategy designed to ensure diversity across regions and social categories. Two groups of participants were included: young people participating in the online survey and institutional representatives participating in the interviews.

For the survey, a convenience sampling approach was used to reach young people aged 15–29 from different municipalities, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic contexts. While this approach does not allow statistical representativeness, it facilitated broad geographical coverage and the inclusion of diverse youth perspectives.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to select participants directly involved in youth governance and the implementation of Law No. 75/2019. Participants included representatives of municipal youth sectors and Local Youth Councils from 22 municipalities. This approach ensured access to respondents with relevant institutional knowledge (Patton, 2002).

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by removing personal identifiers from the data, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process.

Document and Data Analysis

In addition to surveys and interviews, the study incorporated document analysis of legal and policy materials related to youth participation in Albania, including Law No. 75/2019, the National Youth Strategy 2022–2029, government reports,

municipal documents, and publications by civil society and international organizations. Document analysis was used to contextualize empirical findings and identify institutional developments and policy priorities concerning youth participation.

The quantitative data collected through the survey were analyzed descriptively in order to identify patterns of youth participation, levels of awareness of participatory mechanisms, perceptions of local government responsiveness, and barriers to engagement. The analysis focused primarily on frequencies, percentages, and comparative trends across key demographic and participation-related variables.

The qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts and notes were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to youth participation, institutional effectiveness, implementation challenges, and perceptions of influence in local decision-making processes.

The coding process combined both deductive and inductive approaches. Initial analytical categories were informed by the study's theoretical framework, particularly concepts related to participation, empowerment, and participatory governance, while additional themes emerged directly from the interview data during the analysis. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a more comprehensive interpretation of youth participation in Albania by linking broader participation patterns with the institutional realities shaping local governance practices.

Limitations

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The use of convenience and purposive sampling limits statistical generalizability, while the online distribution of the survey may have underrepresented less connected or less civically engaged youth. In addition, voluntary participation may have introduced self-selection bias, and the findings reflect the political and institutional context of Albania during the period of data collection.

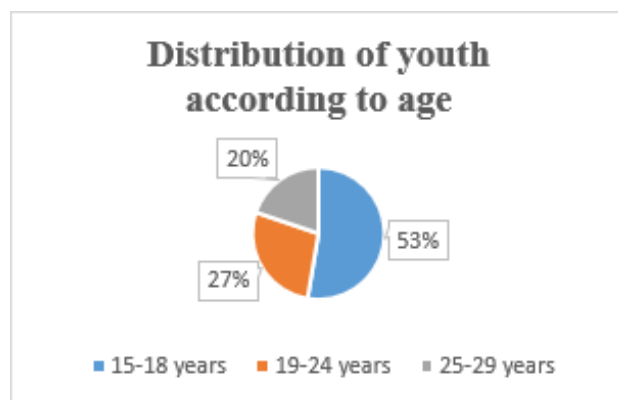
Findings: Institutionalizing Youth Participation without Empowerment? Evidence from Albanian Municipalities

Profile of Respondents

The survey was completed by 207 young people aged between 15 and 29 years old from municipalities across Albania. Respondents represented both urban and rural areas, with 54.1% residing in urban municipalities and 45.9% in rural communities. This relatively balanced geographical distribution provides an opportunity to capture perspectives from diverse local governance contexts and varying levels of access to participatory opportunities. Respondents originated from a wide range of municipalities, including Tirana, Durrës, Fier, Elbasan, Shkodër, Korçë, Berat, Kamëz, Vau i Dejës, Roskovec, Librazhd, Shijak, Dibër, and Krujë, among others. Such diversity increases the analytical value of the findings by incorporating experiences from both larger urban centers and smaller municipalities.

The sample was dominated by female respondents, who accounted for approximately three-quarters of participants, while male respondents represented a considerably smaller share. Thus, there were 159 female and 47 male respondents. In terms of age, 109 participants were aged 15–18, 57 were aged 19–24, and 41 were aged 25–29, indicating stronger participation among younger age groups.

Although the survey does not provide a statistically representative sample of all Albanian youth, it captures perspectives from a broad range of geographical, social, and demographic backgrounds. This diversity strengthens the analytical value of the findings by reflecting the varied experiences and challenges young people face in relation to local governance and participation across different municipalities and communities.



Educational attainment was relatively high, with most respondents having completed secondary education or pursuing higher education studies. More than 44% of respondents reported holding or pursuing university-level qualifications, while only a small proportion had completed only basic education.

Although the sample cannot be considered statistically representative of all Albanian youth, it reflects a broad range of educational, geographical, and social backgrounds, providing valuable insights into youth perceptions of participation and local governance.

Awareness of Local Governance and Youth Participation Mechanisms

A central objective of Law No. 75/2019 is to strengthen youth participation by creating institutional mechanisms that facilitate communication and cooperation between young people and local authorities. However, participation presupposes awareness. According to both Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation and Hart's (1992) Ladder of Youth Participation, access to information represents a prerequisite for meaningful engagement. Citizens and young people cannot effectively participate in decision-making processes if they lack knowledge about institutional opportunities and governance structures.

The survey findings reveal a mixed picture regarding youth awareness of local governance processes. Slightly more than half of respondents (52.7%) reported being informed about decisions taken by their municipality, while 47.3% indicated that they were not informed. At first glance, this result appears encouraging because a majority of respondents demonstrate some awareness of local decision-making. Nevertheless, the fact that nearly one-half of surveyed youth remain uninformed highlights a significant transparency and communication challenge.

From the perspective of participatory governance theory, this finding is particularly important. Participatory governance assumes that citizens possess sufficient information to engage in consultation, deliberation, and policy influence (Fung & Wright, 2003). The survey results suggest that many municipalities have not yet succeeded in creating information channels capable of reaching a broad segment of the youth population. Consequently, participation opportunities may exist formally while remaining inaccessible in practice.

The findings also provide insight into the mechanisms through which young people acquire information. Social media emerged as the dominant source of information regarding municipal activities and decisions. Respondents frequently mentioned Facebook, Instagram, municipal websites, online news portals, and information shared through Local Youth Councils. This finding reflects broader trends identified in the literature concerning the increasing importance of digital platforms for youth civic engagement (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). At the same time, reliance on social media suggests that young people who are less active online

may face additional barriers in accessing information regarding participation opportunities.

A similar pattern emerges when examining awareness of Local Youth Councils (KVRs), one of the principal institutional innovations introduced through Law No. 75/2019. While 56.3% of respondents reported having heard of Local Youth Councils, 23.3% had never heard of them and an additional 20.4% were uncertain. These results indicate that despite efforts to institutionalize youth participation, awareness of the primary participatory mechanism remains incomplete.

The findings become even more revealing when respondents were asked whether a Local Youth Council had been established in their municipality. Although 51.9% confirmed its existence, more than 40% either did not know or were uncertain. This discrepancy highlights an important distinction between institutional creation and institutional visibility. Municipalities may formally comply with legal obligations by establishing Local Youth Councils, but the councils themselves may not yet function as visible or widely recognized participatory spaces within local communities.

This finding resonates strongly with Cornwall's (2008) critique of participatory institutions. Cornwall argues that the mere creation of participatory spaces does not guarantee effective participation. Such spaces must also be visible, accessible, and perceived as meaningful by those they are intended to serve. The Albanian case appears to reflect this challenge. While institutional structures exist, many young people remain unaware of them or uncertain about their purpose.

Awareness of municipal youth officers follows a similar pattern. Approximately 58% of respondents were aware that their municipality employed a staff member responsible for youth affairs. While this suggests that youth-related structures have achieved a certain degree of visibility, a substantial proportion of respondents remained uninformed. The persistence of these information gaps suggests that communication strategies continue to represent a significant weakness in local youth governance.

The issue becomes even more pronounced when examining consultation mechanisms. Only 46.1% of respondents indicated that municipalities organize open consultation meetings before adopting youth-related policies, while the majority either believed that such meetings do not occur or were unaware of their existence. Similarly, only 46.4% reported receiving advance notification regarding such meetings.

Taken together, these findings reveal an important paradox. Since the adoption of Law No. 75/2019, Albania has made substantial progress in institutionalizing youth participation through Local Youth Councils, municipal youth officers, and consultation mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of these structures appears constrained by uneven awareness and communication deficits. In Arnstein's terms, municipalities may have succeeded in establishing institutional channels

for information and consultation, yet many young people remain positioned at the lower levels of the participation ladder because they lack sufficient knowledge about how and when to engage.

Consequently, the findings suggest that the challenge facing youth participation in Albania is no longer solely the creation of institutions, but rather ensuring that those institutions become visible, accessible, and meaningful to the broader youth population. The transition from formal institutionalization to substantive participation remains incomplete, and communication appears to be one of the principal barriers preventing further progress.

Institutional Perspectives on Youth Participation: Between Formal Commitment and Practical Constraints

The interviews conducted with representatives from 22 Albanian municipalities provide important insights into how local authorities perceive youth participation and how participation mechanisms established under Law No. 75/2019 function in practice. While survey findings revealed that many young people remain only partially informed about local decision-making processes and perceive their influence as limited, municipal representatives generally portrayed a more positive picture of youth engagement. The comparison between these two perspectives highlights a recurring tension between institutional efforts to create participatory opportunities and young people's perceptions regarding the effectiveness of these opportunities.

Institutionalization of Participation Mechanisms

A first important finding concerns the successful institutionalization of youth participation mechanisms across Albanian municipalities. Nearly all interviewed municipalities reported having established structures intended to facilitate youth engagement, particularly Local Youth Councils (KVRs), public consultations, open meetings, and dedicated municipal staff responsible for youth affairs. Representatives consistently described youth participation as a municipal priority and emphasized efforts to create formal channels through which young people could communicate their concerns and proposals.

These findings suggest that Albania has made significant progress in implementing the institutional requirements introduced by Law No. 75/2019. From the perspective of participatory governance theory, the establishment of these structures represents an important step toward creating institutional spaces for civic engagement (Fung & Wright, 2003). Similarly, Arnstein's (1969) framework would place these developments above the level of non-participation, as municipalities have created mechanisms that at least enable consultation and communication with young citizens.

However, the findings also reveal considerable variation between municipalities regarding the maturity and effectiveness of these structures. While municipalities such as Shkodër, Roskovec, Bulqizë, Berat, and Vau i Dejës reported relatively active youth councils and regular consultations, other municipalities described more limited engagement or structures that were still in early stages of development. This uneven implementation suggests that institutionalization has occurred at different speeds across local governments.

The Participation Paradox: Meetings Exist, Yet Participation Remains Limited

One of the most striking findings emerging from the interviews concerns the discrepancy between the existence of participatory opportunities and actual youth engagement. Almost all municipal representatives reported organizing open meetings and consultation activities for young people. Yet many simultaneously acknowledged that participation levels remain inconsistent and frequently lower than expected. Several interviewees characterized youth participation as “satisfactory” or “good,” while others described it as “limited,” “weak,” or “sporadic.”

This finding closely mirrors the survey results. While municipalities report creating opportunities for participation, only 40.1% of surveyed young people reported having participated in open municipal meetings, and nearly 60% had never attended such activities. Similarly, more than half of respondents reported either not knowing whether consultation meetings existed or not being informed about them.

The discrepancy between institutional and youth perspectives illustrates what Cornwall (2008) describes as the distinction between invited spaces and effective participation. Municipalities may create participatory spaces, but these spaces do not automatically generate engagement. Participation requires visibility, accessibility, and the perception that participation can produce meaningful outcomes.

Why Are Young People Not Participating?

The interviews provide valuable insights into the factors that continue to limit youth engagement in local governance. Although municipalities have established a range of participatory mechanisms, interviewees consistently identified barriers that hinder young people from taking advantage of these opportunities. Four interconnected themes emerged: information deficits, low levels of trust and political efficacy, historical and cultural barriers, and demographic challenges linked to migration.

Information Deficits

The most frequently cited barrier was the lack of information regarding participation opportunities. Municipal representatives repeatedly emphasized

that many young people remain unaware of consultation processes, Local Youth Councils (KVRs), and other municipal initiatives targeting youth engagement. This finding strongly reinforces the survey results, where nearly half of respondents reported insufficient information about municipal decision-making processes, while substantial proportions were unaware of the existence or role of Local Youth Councils.

The persistence of these information gaps indicates that the challenge facing municipalities extends beyond the creation of participatory structures. Institutional opportunities cannot generate meaningful engagement if young people remain unaware of their existence. As several interviewees noted, communication efforts often fail to reach broader segments of the youth population, limiting participation to a relatively small group of already engaged individuals.

Trust, Political Efficacy, and Perceived Influence

A second recurring theme concerned trust in institutions and the perceived effectiveness of participation. Many interviewees observed that young people frequently question whether their involvement can produce tangible outcomes. Municipal representatives noted that participation is often discouraged by the belief that local authorities do not seriously consider youth opinions or that consultation processes rarely influence final decisions.

These perceptions closely mirror the survey findings. Only a minority of respondents believed they had substantial influence over municipal youth policies, while many reported remaining passive when they disagreed with local decisions because they doubted their views would make a difference. Such findings are particularly significant from the perspective of empowerment theory, which emphasizes that participation depends not only on opportunities for engagement but also on individuals' belief in their capacity to influence outcomes (Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 1995). The interviews suggest that this sense of political efficacy remains relatively weak among many Albanian young people.

Historical and Cultural Barriers

Beyond institutional factors, interviewees frequently referred to deeper cultural and historical influences shaping youth engagement. Several argued that local government continues to be perceived as a sphere dominated by adults, political elites, and established actors, limiting young people's sense of belonging within governance processes. One respondent described local institutions as a "hermetically closed space," reflecting a perception of distance between young citizens and decision-making authorities.

These observations resonate with broader scholarship on civic participation in post-communist societies, where low institutional trust and limited traditions of participatory governance often constrain citizen engagement. In this context,

participation is influenced not only by the availability of institutional mechanisms but also by long-standing perceptions regarding the accessibility and responsiveness of public institutions.

Migration and Demographic Challenges

Interviewees from smaller municipalities highlighted youth migration as an additional obstacle to participation. The movement of young people toward larger urban centers or abroad reduces the pool of potential participants and weakens the continuity of local youth initiatives. This challenge was particularly evident in municipalities facing population decline, where maintaining active youth structures and sustaining participation over time proved increasingly difficult.

Taken together, these findings suggest that youth disengagement cannot be explained solely by institutional shortcomings. Rather, it reflects the interaction of informational, psychological, cultural, and demographic factors that shape young people's willingness and ability to engage in local governance.

Local Youth Councils: Symbolic Structures or Effective Mechanisms?

The interviews provide important evidence regarding the role of Local Youth Councils (KVRs), widely regarded by municipal representatives as one of the most significant innovations introduced by Law No. 75/2019. Interviewees generally described KVRs as institutional platforms through which young people can articulate concerns, propose initiatives, and contribute to discussions on local development.

However, the effectiveness of these councils varies considerably across municipalities. In municipalities such as Bulqizë, Shkodër, Mat, Roskovec, and Berat, interviewees reported regular meetings and active involvement in issues such as educational infrastructure, youth centers, digital skills training, sports facilities, and recreational spaces. In several cases, respondents identified tangible outcomes linked to council activities, including support for educational programs, community initiatives, and local infrastructure improvements.

In contrast, representatives from other municipalities described councils that met infrequently, struggled to attract participants, or played a largely symbolic role. Several interviewees acknowledged that youth proposals were often only partially implemented or remained unrealized because of administrative, financial, or political constraints. These differences suggest that while KVRs have been successfully institutionalized across municipalities, their practical influence remains uneven.

Viewed through Arnstein's (1969) framework, many Local Youth Councils appear positioned between consultation and partnership. Young people are increasingly included in discussions and invited to express their views, yet decision-making authority remains concentrated within municipal institutions. As

a result, participation often remains advisory rather than decisional, highlighting the continuing gap between formal inclusion and substantive influence.

Financial Constraints and the Limits of Participation

Among the structural barriers identified in the interviews, limited financial resources emerged as one of the most significant. Municipal representatives frequently reported the absence of dedicated budgets for youth participation initiatives, while others described allocations that were insufficient to meet local needs. In several municipalities, interviewees were unable to identify a specific budget line supporting youth participation activities.

This issue is particularly important because participatory mechanisms require resources to function effectively. Youth councils, consultations, training activities, and youth-led projects all depend on sustained financial support. Without adequate resources, participatory structures risk becoming symbolic institutions that exist formally but have limited capacity to influence policy or generate meaningful engagement.

The findings therefore suggest that one of the main challenges facing youth participation in Albania is not the absence of institutional mechanisms but the limited resources available to sustain and operationalize them. Strengthening youth participation requires not only formal structures but also the financial and administrative capacity necessary to translate participation into tangible outcomes.

Discussion: From Institutionalization to Meaningful Participation?

The findings reveal a significant gap between the institutionalization of youth participation and the realization of meaningful youth influence in local governance. While Law No. 75/2019 has expanded participatory opportunities through the establishment of Local Youth Councils, consultation mechanisms, and municipal youth structures, the evidence suggests that these arrangements often operate primarily at the level of consultation rather than shared decision-making. This distinction reflects broader debates within participatory governance literature concerning the relationship between institutional inclusion and effective empowerment (Fung & Wright, 2003; Cornwall, 2008).

The findings therefore support a distinction frequently emphasized in participation studies between formal participation and substantive influence. Although Albania has made important progress in creating institutional opportunities for youth engagement, awareness of participation mechanisms remains uneven, participation levels are relatively modest, and many young people perceive their ability to shape municipal decisions as limited. Similar patterns have been identified in previous studies, which argue that participation should not be assessed solely through the existence of participatory structures

but through the extent to which participants can influence outcomes (Checkoway, 2011; Fung, 2006). In this respect, the Albanian case suggests that institutional reforms have advanced more rapidly than the capacity of these institutions to generate meaningful engagement and influence.

Interpreting Youth Participation through Arnstein's Ladder

Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation provides a useful framework for interpreting these findings. Arnstein argues that participation should be evaluated not by the existence of participatory mechanisms but by the degree of power and influence granted to participants. Her model distinguishes between non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power, emphasizing that genuine participation occurs only when citizens possess meaningful opportunities to influence decisions.

The evidence from this study suggests that municipalities have largely moved beyond the lowest levels of participation. Local authorities increasingly provide information to young people, organize consultations, establish Local Youth Councils, and create opportunities for dialogue. These developments indicate an important shift toward more participatory forms of governance and are broadly consistent with international standards promoted by the European Union and the United Nations.

However, participation frequently remains concentrated within the intermediate levels of Arnstein's ladder, particularly information and consultation. Although young people are increasingly invited to express their views, many respondents remain uncertain whether these views ultimately influence municipal decisions. Local Youth Councils generally function as advisory rather than decision-making bodies, and municipal representatives acknowledged that youth proposals are not always translated into policy outcomes. Consequently, participation often remains consultative rather than transformative.

This finding highlights the distinction between procedural and substantive participation. Municipalities may comply with legal requirements by creating councils and consultation processes, yet these mechanisms risk becoming symbolic if they fail to provide visible opportunities for influence. Similar concerns have been raised in studies of participatory governance, which emphasize that institutional innovations can generate inclusion without necessarily redistributing decision-making power (Fung & Wright, 2003; Cornwall, 2008).

Beyond Tokenism? Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation

Hart's (1992) Ladder of Youth Participation further enriches the interpretation of these findings by focusing specifically on young people's role within governance processes. Hart distinguishes between tokenistic forms of participation and forms

of engagement characterized by genuine collaboration and shared decision-making between adults and young people.

The findings suggest that Albanian municipalities have largely moved beyond the forms of manipulation, decoration, and tokenism identified by Hart. Youth councils, consultations, and participatory forums provide opportunities for young people to express opinions and engage with local authorities. Municipal representatives generally demonstrated a willingness to involve young people in discussions concerning youth-related policies and community development.

Nevertheless, participation rarely reaches the highest levels identified by Hart, namely youth-initiated activities, youth-led governance, or shared decision-making arrangements. Instead, participation appears concentrated within the categories of “consulted and informed” and “adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people.” While these levels represent meaningful progress, decision-making authority remains largely concentrated within adult-dominated institutional structures.

This observation is consistent with broader research on youth participation, which finds that young people are frequently invited to contribute ideas and opinions but are less often involved in agenda-setting and final decision-making processes (Checkoway, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). The Albanian case therefore illustrates a broader challenge facing many democracies: moving from youth consultation toward genuine youth influence.

Participation, Empowerment, and Political Efficacy

A central argument of empowerment theory is that participation becomes meaningful only when individuals possess both opportunities for engagement and the perceived capacity to influence outcomes (Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment therefore encompasses not only institutional access but also psychological dimensions such as confidence, efficacy, and trust.

The findings reveal an important tension in this regard. Municipalities have established formal opportunities for participation, yet many young people remain skeptical about the effectiveness of these mechanisms. Survey respondents frequently reported limited influence over municipal decisions, while interviewees identified low trust and weak perceptions of efficacy as major barriers to engagement. These findings suggest that institutional participation has progressed more rapidly than psychological empowerment.

This pattern is closely linked to broader debates on social capital and institutional trust. Previous research demonstrates that citizens are more likely to participate when they perceive institutions as responsive and trustworthy (Putnam, 1993; Norris, 2011). When participation is perceived as unlikely to produce meaningful change, citizens become less willing to invest time and effort in civic engagement.

Participation without influence may therefore generate frustration rather than empowerment, reinforcing political disengagement rather than reducing it (Cornwall, 2008).

Conclusion

This study examined youth participation in local decision-making processes in Albania following the adoption of Law No. 75/2019 “On Youth.” By combining survey data from 207 young people with interviews conducted with representatives from 22 municipalities, the research assessed the extent to which the institutional mechanisms introduced by the law have strengthened youth engagement in local governance.

The findings indicate that Law No. 75/2019 has played an important role in institutionalizing youth participation across Albanian municipalities. The establishment of Local Youth Councils, the expansion of consultation mechanisms, and the designation of municipal structures responsible for youth affairs have created new opportunities for young people to engage with local institutions. These developments represent a significant shift toward a more structured and participatory approach to youth governance.

However, the study demonstrates that the creation of participatory institutions does not automatically translate into meaningful participation or influence. Despite the existence of formal mechanisms, awareness of participation opportunities remains uneven, levels of engagement are relatively modest, and many young people continue to perceive their influence on local policymaking as limited. The findings suggest that youth participation in Albania remains largely concentrated at the levels of information and consultation, while opportunities for shared decision-making and substantive influence remain comparatively weak.

The article’s main contribution lies in highlighting the gap between institutionalization and empowerment. While Albania has successfully established the foundations of a youth participation system, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is constrained by information deficits, limited political efficacy, weak feedback mechanisms, uneven municipal capacities, and insufficient financial resources. As a result, participation often functions as a consultative process rather than as a mechanism through which young people can shape policy outcomes.

More broadly, the findings illustrate a challenge common to many transitional democracies. Institutional reforms can create formal spaces for participation, but democratic inclusion depends on whether citizens perceive these spaces as accessible, responsive, and capable of producing tangible outcomes. In this regard, the study identifies a participation paradox: municipalities increasingly provide opportunities for engagement, yet many young people remain unconvinced

that participation leads to meaningful influence. This perception weakens trust, reduces political efficacy, and ultimately limits sustained engagement.

The findings carry important implications for policy and practice. Strengthening youth participation requires moving beyond the creation of institutional structures toward improving their visibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness. Greater investment in communication strategies, civic education, youth leadership development, and dedicated financial support for youth initiatives would help strengthen the link between participation and influence. Equally important is the development of feedback mechanisms that demonstrate how young people's contributions shape local policies and decisions.

Ultimately, the success of youth participation policies should not be measured solely by the number of councils established or consultations organized, but by the extent to which young people are able to exercise meaningful influence over decisions affecting their communities. The next stage of youth governance reform in Albania therefore lies not in expanding participatory structures, but in ensuring that existing mechanisms evolve from forums of consultation into genuine arenas of democratic influence and co-decision.

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