



CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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List of Abbreviations

APV	Autonomous Province of Vojvodina
BUM	Becej Youth Association
CCR	Center for Children’s Rights
CRC	Committee on the Rights of the Child
CRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
GC	General Comment
KOMS	Youth umbrella organization
LGU	Local self-government units
MODS	Network of Organizations for Children in Serbia
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NAPC	National Action Plan for Children
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SAS	Scout Association of Serbia
UCRC	Užice Child Rights Centre
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNSS	Union of High School Students of Serbia
WBYL	Western Balkans Youth Lab
FG	Focus group

Introduction

Participation is a fundamental human right applicable to all individuals, including children and youth, who have the right to express their views on issues impacting their lives. Child empowerment is a growing global policy priority (Gottschalk, 2020), with participation serving as both a means of self-representation and a pathway for improving children's societal standing. The International Year of Youth (1985) identified four key areas of youth participation: economic (employment), political (decision-making), social (community engagement), and cultural (artistic and cultural expression). These areas are central to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which emphasises respecting and involving children in decision-making.

The CRC, specifically Article 12, asserts children's right to participate in decisions affecting them. Legislation in Serbia supports this and reflects growing global awareness that involving children in decision-making contributes to more cohesive, equitable societies while helping young people transition more confidently into adulthood (Patton et al., 2016). Involving children today is critical for fostering empowered future citizens, especially in democracies where civic engagement is declining (OECD, 2021). Despite these developments, children's perspectives are often filtered through adults' biases or misrepresented to fit predetermined standards (Roberts & Nanson, 2000; Edwards & Wearing, 2003). Public policies frequently prioritise adult viewpoints over those of children, even when the children's well-being is at risk. The CRC challenges this adult-centred paradigm by advocating for children to be active participants and rights holders in their development. Article 27 underscores children's right to live in conditions supportive of their physical, mental, and moral growth. Involving children in decision-making ensures that their interests are addressed and recognises their capabilities and expertise (Tisdall, 2016). However, global acceptance of this shift remains incomplete. While the CRC has driven change, entrenched traditions still limit children's roles in decision-making.

The right of young people to express their views is crucial for their involvement in decision-making (Edwards & Wearing, 2003). Recognising young people as contributors rather than problems reflects a shift sparked by the CRC, emphasising the importance of taking children's perspectives seriously. While there has been progress, full recognition of children's voices as equal in societal discourse is still a work in progress. To fully support children's participation, efforts must focus on fostering collaboration between adults and young people, ensuring children receive the support they need to articulate their views. Addressing these challenges requires revisiting the documents and mechanisms that govern children's participation and the integration of their voices into adult-dominated spheres. The following discussion will analyse key documents, including the CRC, and explore instruments that promote meaningful youth participation.

This study explores children's involvement in decision-making at the family, school, and community levels. It analyses the views of government officials, NGOs, and experts on barriers and opportunities for improvement. It also examines children's participation in decision-making in Serbia, highlighting the challenges in creating an inclusive environment. Using a mixed-method approach, it gathers perspectives from 55 children through questionnaires and eight children through focus groups, alongside inputs from decision-makers, stakeholders, and NGOs involved in child rights promotion and protection. During the qualitative phase of the study, interviews were conducted with representatives from ten out of the twelve identified organizations that are relevant to the topic of child participation in Serbia: Council for the Rights of a Child, Ombudsman's Office, Office of the Commissioner for Protection of Equality, Youth Council of the Ministry of Youth and Tourism of the Republic of Serbia, UNICEF Youth Office, Center for Child Rights, Užice Child Rights Centre, Network of Organizations for Children (MODS), and Union of Secondary School Students of Serbia, Youth umbrella organization (KOMS). The organizations included governmental and non-governmental bodies that play significant roles in promoting and supporting the involvement of children in decision-making processes. The interviews aimed to gather insights and perspectives on how these organizations perceive and facilitate child participation and the challenges they encounter in this area. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of child participation in Serbia and the various efforts different stakeholders made to engage children effectively.

1 Child Participation: Definition and Models

Children's rights are an intrinsic extension of human rights, universally applicable to every child. These rights, while sharing the same foundation and substance as human rights, represent a distinctive expression tailored to the unique needs of children. Recognising children as autonomous individuals with specific requirements due to their age and vulnerability has led to establishing a dedicated set of rights for their protection. A pivotal evolution in realising children's rights involves perceiving children as rights-bearing subjects who can formally demand the fulfilment of their rights from the state. This perspective refrains from framing children's rights in terms of obligations and responsibilities, moving beyond the notion of children as objects needing protection and affirming them as subjective individuals with their perspectives. The essence of respecting children's rights is intricately linked to fostering their active participation in realising these rights. To have the capacity to take action, children need knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they can translate into actions that can benefit their local and global communities (Milfont and Sibley, 2012).

Adhering to Hart's definition, participation is characterised as a process of shared decision-making that influences one's life and the community. Positioned as both a tool for building democracy and a metric for evaluating it, participation stands as a fundamental right of citizenship (Hart, 1997: 5). Viewing participation as a dynamic process recognises its phases: dialogue in decision-making, implementation, feedback, and reflection, with the commencement of dialogue forming the foundational step. This nuanced understanding of participation allows for acknowledging and respecting the evolving practice of involving vulnerable groups in decision-making processes.

We can assert that participation is vital to resolving the debate on whether it entails equality in participation or communication. Contrary to the dominant view, participation is considered a unique process, integral to other processes such as 'participatory care.' Both participation and care are regarded as equals, with participation not functioning as a mere instrument but rather as a fundamental component intrinsic to these processes (Wilkinson, 2000; Lundy, 2018). When examining the factors influencing individuals' motivation to engage, the active citizenship theory, as outlined by Stroobants et al. (2001), provides insights by balancing the interplay of challenge, capacity, and connectedness. (Orr et al., 2016).

The initial driver for participation is the allure or challenge of a personal or societal issue that captivates individuals and prompts their involvement. To encourage young people to participate, there must be a tangible belief that their engagement can effect meaningful change. The capacity to make a difference is the impetus for participation, encompassing

specific knowledge, experiences, insights, and strategies. Young people recognise the value of challenges when equipped with the necessary skills (Van Beers, 2002; Jones, 2017; Hester and Moore, 2018).

Crucially, a sense of connection to the environment and community is essential for fostering participation. It is imperative for young people to perceive their ideas as supported, creating an environment where they can actively engage and confront challenges (Siegler et al., 2003; Lansdown, 2001).

Facilitating dialogue is another critical component for young people to develop their opinions. It necessitates giving them space and freedom to cultivate their capacities and personalities. For those reliant on social welfare services, the scope for participation and personal development is often limited, fostering a perception of diminished control. The potential for their involvement arises when young people believe their participation holds the power to enact change and when others accord their viewpoints the respect they deserve.

1.1 Models of Participation

Participatory frameworks hinge on the conception of children as capable social actors who can effectively interact with others to contribute to decision-making processes that impact them (Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood, 2011). Children's involvement in decision-making can manifest in diverse ways, ranging from engaging in consultations with adults to express their views to more active participation models where children assume a certain degree of responsibility, power, and influence in decision-making (Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood, 2011; Botchwey et al., 2019; Partridge, 2005). The initial participation models, such as Arnstein's (1969), primarily addressed participation categorisation, focusing on civic engagement and public planning for adults in the United States. In response to the evolving societal perspective on children, numerous authors attempted to adapt Arnstein's model to encompass the involvement of children.

Marking a significant milestone in this adaptation, Hart was the first to modify Arnstein's model to include children and young people. He structured his model as a scale with eight levels, ranging from manipulation and decoration to tokenism, adults deciding but informing young people, consulting and informing, adults initiated and shared decisions with young people, youth initiated and directed arrangements, to youth initiated and shared responsibility for decisions with adults (Hart, 1997). Notably, the first three levels exclude children and young people from the decision-making process. While Hart's model is valuable, it has limitations, particularly in its implicit assumption that higher-level participation holds more significant value than lower-level participation. Nonetheless, a crucial perspective underscores true participation when a child autonomously engages. Conducting a critique

of Hart's participation ladder model, a novel approach emerges in the network participation model, as introduced by Lardner in 2012. Diverging from Hart's assumption that higher levels of participation inherently signify a superior position, Lardner contends that the appropriateness of a given level of participation depends on the specific circumstances. By interweaving the concepts of participation and empowerment, the network model aims to better capture the intricacies of decision-making. Treseder contributes to the discourse on the involvement of children and young people, advocating for their active participation alongside adults in the decision-making process, with the crucial stipulation that adults should provide support in this collaborative effort (Treseder, 1997).

Synthesising various participation models, Shier presents an encompassing framework featuring five levels of participation and three corresponding levels of commitment at each participation level, termed opening, chance, and commitment (Shier, 2001). The opening phase initiates when a professional worker assumes a case, signifying the commencement of the participation process even before direct contact with the child occurs. The chance phase materialises as the professional possesses the requisite skills, knowledge, and resources to address the child's or young person's needs. The commitment level pertains to an organizational mandate to act at a specific level of participation. This model is valuable in engaging children and young people in decision-making, particularly planning.

Analysing these diverse participation models underscores three indispensable elements for effective participation: knowledge, opportunity, and support (Willow, 2002). Knowledge pertains to how information is imparted to children in a manner that is not only accessible but also understandable to them. In casework, it is crucial to ensure that the child or young person possesses fundamental information about the plan, the structure of development meetings, their content, and avenues for participation. Tailoring the communication to the child's understanding is paramount to elucidating expectations and fostering their active involvement. While institutions often rely on their staff to convey information to children, there is frequently a lapse in ensuring they present the information in a clear and accessible format tailored to the children involved.

For effective participation, children must be provided with opportunities to engage. Some institutions employ methods such as recording children's views concerning their plans and maintaining these records in the child's file (Van Beers, 2002). The strategies for facilitating children's participation may vary, but they must be ingrained in the institutional culture. Cultivating an environment where children receive information and have tangible opportunities to contribute becomes integral to institutional practices. Facilitating the participation of children and young people is significantly enhanced when they receive support from a trusted adult. While this is essential for all children, it holds particular significance for children in care who may harbour less trust in adults due to their unique circumstances. For these children, the support of a trusted adult becomes even more crucial. Specialised support is imperative for children and young people who

have experienced instances where adults fail to listen to or respect their viewpoints. These children may not be accustomed to expressing their perspectives, necessitating additional assistance. Various individuals in their lives can provide this support, including educators, parents, caregivers, teachers, case managers, and other significant figures (Gilligan, 2000).

Children and young people readily perceive situations without room for their participation in decision-making processes. It becomes apparent to them when adults intentionally exclude them from these processes. They can discern when their voices will genuinely be heard versus instances where they will be formally informed about decisions made on their behalf (Gottschalk, 2020). The passive engagement of young people results in the creation of passive citizens, indifferent to the potential for participation, thereby perpetuating a tradition of excluding young individuals from decision-making processes. To foster active participation, children and young people must be acquainted with the mechanisms that guarantee their involvement in decision-making processes (Burgund, 2016). These mechanisms should be seamlessly integrated into every institution working with young people, and their usage should be both applicable and easily understandable for children.

Irrespective of the conceptual model guiding or informing the development of a participatory process, children's participation should follow some basic requirements to ensure it is safe, ethical, and meaningful. According to these principles, child participation should be (ChildFund Alliance, Eurochild, Save the Children, UNICEF and World Vision, 2021):

- **Transparent**
- **Voluntary**
- **Respectful**
- **Relevant**
- **Child-friendly** (i.e., there should be adequate time and resources, and approaches should be adapted to the capacities of those participating)
- **Supported by adults who are appropriately trained**
- **Inclusive**
- **Safe and risk-sensitive**
- **Accountable.**

Certain models of deliberative democracy can incorporate the perspectives and contributions of children. Well-designed deliberative processes have the potential to foster the inclusion of traditionally disempowered or historically marginalised groups, including children, within political systems (Curato et al., 2017). Although the involvement of children in the democratic arena is relatively unexplored (Pearse, 2021), there exist potential mechanisms to facilitate this engagement. For instance, schools can serve as spaces for student deliberation and, if appropriately linked, can extend their influence to broader deliberation systems, such as civic spheres (Hayward, 2012; Nishiyama, 2021). This approach can significantly contribute to a more inclusive deliberative system.

2 Child Participation in Serbia: Legal and Policy Framework

The child's right to participation is defined by a series of international documents and specific guidelines that emphasise children's right to participation in certain contexts. The right to participation is one of the four leading principles from which all articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) derive, in addition to the principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, as well as the right to life, survival, and development. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) introduces children's right to freedom of expression and to have their views considered in all matters and proceedings affecting them. Those views must be given due consideration. The Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment No. 12 (2009) emphasises that the mentioned article of the Convention does not impose an age limit regarding the child's right to express their views and discourages states from introducing limits in any law or practice. The children must be heard, assuming they can form their views and have the right to express them. Age in itself is not a factor that should decisively influence the importance of children's views, bearing in mind that their levels of understanding do not always have to be related to their biological age.

The full implementation of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child implies the recognition and respect of non-verbal means of communication, such as play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing, which allow very young children to express their understanding, choices, and preferences (Committee on the rights of the child, 2009). Participation as a right is an integral part and one of the leading principles of many documents within the European Union, such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), the European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021-2024), the European Union Youth Strategy (2019-2027). Children's participation is a crucial aspect of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations until 2030, adopted in 2015. It is a prerequisite for achieving most of the other goals in this document. The Council of Europe (2016) emphasises that it is also essential to carefully consider how laws treat children from vulnerable groups, taking into account factors such as age, disability, and the like. That is to ensure that no restrictions could prevent certain groups of children from participating effectively in decision-making processes.

Following the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment No. 12 (2009), and in the light of respect for the child's right to be heard and to have their opinion and views approached with appropriate attention in the various contexts in which they grow up, develop and learn (family, school, courts, and all administrative procedures), the following chapters will present the legislative framework

of the Republic of Serbia that guarantees the exercise of this right. Understanding the right to participation is a vital prerequisite for ensuring an individualised approach centred on the child and considering children's views and perspectives in each case. Safeguarding and protecting the right to participation, freedom of opinion, and expression is a reliable indicator of the state's commitment to respecting human rights, including children's rights.

In 1990, the Republic of Serbia adopted the Law on the Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), which committed itself to its observance and submission of regular reports on its application to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. In the Republic of Serbia, the child's right to participate is adequately regulated by the Constitution and by a series of legal and by-laws. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia as an umbrella document (2006, Article 46) guarantees freedom of opinion and expression and to seek, receive, or spread information, notices, and ideas by speech, writing, images, or any other way. The laws define the bodies at the state and local level that are responsible for ensuring the participation of children in all matters that concern them. In addition to laws at the state level, specific by-laws, regulations, and policies at the level of the autonomous province of Vojvodina (APV) can also play an essential role in enabling the participation of children and young people in important issues.

It is essential to mention that despite numerous documents regulating the participation of children in the country, the Republic of Serbia is still characterised by the absence of a comprehensive law that would regulate the protection of children's rights. The draft Law on the Rights of the Child and the Protector of the Rights of the Child passed the stage of public discussion in 2019; however, it was still not adopted. The draft of this Law regulates 'the content of children's rights, the way to improve and promote children's rights, the obligations of public authorities in respect of children's rights, the coordination and control of public authorities in respect of children's rights in the implementation of their activities' (Draft of the Law on Children's Rights and the Defender of Rights of the child, 2019, Article 1). The enactment of such legislation is imperative for fostering the coherence of the overarching legal framework concerning children's rights, aligning legislative provisions, and enhancing inter-sectoral coordination. As part of the strategic framework, the Republic of Serbia also lacks a new National Action Plan for Children (NAPC) since the previous one expired in 2015.

2.1 Youth Participation: Legal Mechanisms and Policies

According to the latest population census from 2022, there are 1,047,543 young people (15–29 years old), and they make up 15.76% of the population in the Republic of Serbia (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2023). Ensuring the right to participation is also integral to

the Law on Youth (2022)¹. The Law on Youth (2022) foresees the possibility of establishing youth associations and associations for youth (Article 13) as well as the possibility of these associations joining together in alliances (Article 14). The status of the umbrella association in the Republic of Serbia currently belongs to the Youth Umbrella Organization (KOMS) and the Scout Association of Serbia (SAS). According to this Law (Article 16), the formation of a body entitled the Youth Council is foreseen. The Youth Council is a body established by the Government, at the proposal of the competent Ministry, as an advisory body that has a role in encouraging, implementing, and improving activities related to youth policy (Art. 16). At least one-third of the membership in this body consists of young people from associations and youth associations. According to the Law on Youth (Art. 17), the competent authority of the autonomous province or the competent authority of the local self-government (LGU) unit can also establish provincial, city, and municipal youth councils. The same Law gives local self-government units the possibility of forming a Youth Office to actively involve young people in the life and activities of the communities in which they live (Art. 18). According to the same article, the primary source of funding for these offices is the budgets of local self-government units. The aforementioned Law allows establishing a youth agency to implement various programs per various EU programs (Article 19). All of the above is in accordance with the Law on Local Self-Government (2021, Article 20, Paragraph 15), which determines that local self-government units, among other things, contend with matters of importance for that municipality, among which is youth policy.

The National Strategy for Youth is a document adopted by the Government on the proposal of the competent Ministry, which also regulates the active participation of young people in the community and society. On the Ministry of Youth and Sports² proposal, the Republic of Serbia adopted the Strategy from 2023 to 2030 in February 2023. The right to equal opportunities and participation in all areas of social life is one of the fundamental principles on which the Strategy rests. Active involvement and cooperation of young people means ensuring a stimulating environment and active support in implementing all activities and meaningful participation in decision-making and implementation processes, all based on the complete information of young people. Two action plans for youth were adopted as a supporting document of the Strategy - the Action Plan from 2023 to 2025 and the Policy Action Plan for Youth in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina from 2023 to 2025. Within the special objectives of the mentioned action plans (objective 3 in both documents), it serves as a way to encourage the active participation of young people at all social levels based on various indicators such as the number of local self-government units that have an established Youth Office, the number of proposals and draft regulations and public policy documents of interest to young people in which they gave their opinion, established standards of active participation of young people in decision-making at all levels of Government, adequate allocation of funds for youth support, etc.

1 According to the Law on Youth (2022), the term 'youth' signifies persons from the age of 15 to the age of 30 (Article 3).

2 The current Ministry of Tourism and Youth

As the Republic of Serbia must submit a report on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, it is essential to mention some of the critical provisions of the IV and V reports from 2017 to 2021. Initially, it is imperative to acknowledge that the reporting period was notably influenced by the global COVID-19 pandemic, exerting a substantial impact on the realisation of human rights, encompassing those pertaining to children, both on a global scale and within our nation.

In promoting and fulfilling the right to participate within the legislative framework, the Republic of Serbia has taken significant steps. By initiating amendments to the Family Law (2005), the deletion of the age limit of 10 years is likely, i.e., every child, regardless of age, is enabled to be heard and to freely express their opinion in all procedures that concern them (IV and V periodical report of the RS Government to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022). The Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Juvenile Perpetrators of Criminal Offenses and Criminal Legal Protection of Minors (2005) explicitly formulated the right of minors to have their opinion heard in all relevant proceedings (IV and V periodical report of the RS Government to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022). Addressing the conduct of police officers with minors meant creating a Rulebook on the manner and conditions of applying police powers towards minors (2019), where the child's best interests must be taken into account when acting. Police officers have the obligation to enable the minor and their parents/guardians to participate actively in the procedure.

The next step is also to draw up a new NAPC, for which the Committee gave recommendations in the previous (II and III periodic reports from 2008 to 2014) reporting period. The national action plan for children expired in 2015, and it is necessary to adopt a new strategic framework for realising children's rights in line with the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and international standards. The Draft Law on the Rights of the Child and the Protector of the Rights of the Child, drafted in 2018, is still awaiting adoption by the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. Also, one of the priorities should be the adoption of a new Social Protection Strategy to incorporate the principle of participation.

2.2 Legislative Mechanisms for Children's Participation within the Educational System

Children's participation in education is vital in creating an efficient, inclusive, motivating education system adapted to each individual's needs. The involvement of children in decisions that are important for their position in the school system and in the process of creating a curriculum contributes to their overall development on multiple levels. This way, children will develop self-confidence, responsibility, and critical thinking while strengthening the democratic values of society.

The participation of children in the education system at the national level is defined through three laws: the Law on the Basics of the Education and Upbringing System (2023), the Law on Basic Education and Upbringing (2023), and the Law on Secondary Education and Upbringing (2023). Children's participation within individual educational units (schools) is governed by school regulations such as the School Statute and the Student Parliament Rules of Procedure. According to the Law on the Basics of the Education and Upbringing System (2023), students have the right to freedom of association in different groups, clubs, and the organization of a student Parliament (Article 79, paragraph 8). Article 88 of this Law foresees the establishment of the Student Parliament in the last two grades of elementary school and high school. The primary tasks of the Parliament are as follows (Article 88):

- 1 providing opinions and proposals to professional bodies, the school board, the parents' Council, and the director on: school behavior rules, student safety measures, the annual work plan, the school development plan, the school program, the way the school space is arranged, the choice of textbooks, free activities, participation in sports and other competitions and the organization of all student manifestations in and outside the school and other matters of importance for their education;
- 2 consideration of the relationship and cooperation between students and teachers, educators or professional associates and the atmosphere in the school;
- 3 informing students about issues of special importance for their education and about the activities of the student parliament;
- 4 active participation in the process of planning the development of the school and in the self-evaluation of the school;
- 5 proposing members of the professional asset for development planning and the team for the prevention of peer violence from among students'.

The Parliament is composed of two representatives from each class of the seventh and eighth grade of primary school (Law on Primary Education and Upbringing, 2023, Art. 68), i.e., from each grade in high school (Law on Secondary Education and Upbringing, 2023, Art. 23). Each school year, the class community elects' members of Parliament, who elect the president. Per Article 119 of the Law on the Basics of the Education and Upbringing System (2023), the Parliament elects two student representatives who participate in the school board's work. The student parliament has its rules of procedure harmonised with the school's statute. The Parliament implements its activities based on the work program, which is integral to the school's annual work plan. Student parliaments can join the community of parliaments and cooperate with associations and organizations dedicated to protecting and improving student rights. (Law on the Basics of the Education and Upbringing System, 2023, Article 88).

Analysing the provisions of the laws mentioned above, we can conclude that there are no mechanisms for participation in school life and the creation of educational policies for children/students of a younger age. That could be an issue in promoting higher involvement in decision-making as participation is considered a process rather than an outcome, and it takes time and skills to involve children in active decision-making.

3 Child Participation within State Institutions

Besides developing a legislative framework at the national and local self-government level that supports and encourages children's participation, it is essential to establish bodies and institutions with children's presence to guarantee that their views are adequately addressed. The Council on the Rights of the Child has been established as the primary coordinating body for realising children's rights in collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Serbia. The Law on the Protector of Citizens (2021) provides for establishing an independent body - the Ombudsperson, within the scope of which the Panel of Young Advisors functions. Similarly, as part of the work of the Provincial Ombudsperson, the functioning of the Children's Council is foreseen from 2023. The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, established under the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination (2021), includes the Youth Panel within its functions. The Youth Panel has been an integral part of the institution since its inception, comprising individuals aged 15 to 24, although there is no strict age limit. Representing diverse regions across Serbia, the Panel maintains gender balance and is dedicated to addressing issues related to discrimination.

The National Assembly also has a body whose mandate is dedicated to the rights of the child, namely the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the establishment of which is foreseen by the Law on the National Assembly (2010) and the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly. Per the Law on Youth (2022) in the Republic of Serbia, there is a Youth Council at the national level and a Youth Council of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

The Republic of Serbia strives to respect the Committee's recommendations by including children in decision-making and their consultation when drafting regulations. For example, children could express their opinions at a public hearing during the preparation of the Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Violence from 2020 to 2023, held in several cities across Serbia. Within the framework of this Strategy, the participation of children in creating programs for the prevention of violence, their participation in the work of international forums and groups, etc., is foreseen (IV and V periodical report of the RS Government to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022).

At the meeting of the Council for Monitoring the Implementation of UN Human Rights Recommendations in May 2021, children expressed their views regarding reporting on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Also, children participated in several sessions of the Council for the Rights of a Child of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. Their views and observations were considered when making decisions and conclusions for this government body (IV and V periodic report of the Government of the

RS to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022). Some of the children's views were included in the IV and V periodical reports of the Government of the RS.

Various bodies at the national and local level, whose work is dedicated to protecting children's rights and in which children actively participate, contribute to the strengthening and understanding of human rights and democracy, ensuring protection and optimal development. This chapter will present the specific characteristics of each of these bodies.

3.1 Council on the Rights of the Child

The Council on the Rights of the Child is an advisory body of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, supported by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. It was established by Government Decision No. 560-7228/2002-1, dated May 16, 2002, with the tasks of:

'initiating measures to harmonise Government policies in areas related to children and youth (health, education, culture, social issues); initiates measures to build a comprehensive and coherent policy towards children and young people; defines recommendations for the achievement of important social indicators in the field of child care and proposes policies for the realisation of children's rights in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; analyses the effects of measures taken by competent authorities for children, young people, families with children and birth rates; as well as to monitor the realisation and protection of children's rights in Serbia.'

The Ministry of Family Care and Demography provides professional and administrative-technical support to the Council.

After considering the II and III periodical reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Republic of Serbia in 2017, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended to the Republic of Serbia the strengthening of this coordinating body and its role as the main institutional mechanism for the coordination of all activities related to the implementation of the Convention at the national and local level (Center for Children's Rights, 2020). The revised action plan for chapter 23 from 2020, as an essential instrument in the EU integration process, also foresees the strengthening of the Council on the Rights of the Child.

In the IV and V periodic reports of the Government of the Republic of Serbia to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2022), the chapter refers to respect for the child's view and per recommendation 29. CRC/C/SRB/CO/2-3, children participated in several

sessions of this body, and their observations and views were taken into account when making decisions and reaching conclusions during the mandate of this Government body.

Nonetheless, it is essential to mention that, according to the available data, the Council on the Rights of the Child has not had continuity in its work for the last six years since the effectiveness of its work is affected by any change in the Government, which consequently implies the formation of a new convocation of the Council. During the interview with the Council on the Rights of the Child representative, the consensus was that this body undertakes no activity or responsibility.

'No, there is no plan because the Council on the Rights of the Child is in some way disempowered and there is no communication, nor does it receive any obligations, nor does it receive any tasks. No one takes care of what is being done, does not take part in the adoption of Strategies which are non-existent in the area, or they all go beyond what concerns children. Children's rights have been sidelined for a very long time' (Representative of the Council on the Rights of the Child).

The functionality of this Government body is not at an enviable level, bearing in mind that recently, this body has not taken any significant steps or proposed initiatives to realise and improve children's rights.

The real action plans that this country brought were all last adopted in 2011/2012. After that, in fact, nothing was done according to them, no new action plans were made after that, the Government's policy is non-transparent, several strategies were adopted that were confusing and then failed, and which were completely unrelated, and the Council on the Rights of the Child was not in a situation that he can coordinate in any way, nor participate in it' (Representative of the Council on the Rights of the Child).

The website of the Council on the Rights of the Child is not updated promptly, and the activities of this body are not sufficiently known because there is no annual work plan. Activities are mainly carried out ad hoc and according to the policy of the competent Ministry. The lack of allocation of budget funds for the functioning of the Council entails insufficient and inadequate human and technical resources. According to available data, the Government of the Republic of Serbia convened a new Council in March 2023. Still, there is no available information about the meetings of the new convocation (Center for Children's Rights, 2023). So far, no child has been included in the convocation of the Council for Rights. The mentioned shortcomings significantly affect the lack of continuity, efficiency, and coordination regarding children's rights in the Republic of Serbia.

The Council on the Rights of the Child, as it was established and with its powers, it was really doing very serious things. And initiated, and made decisions, and

advised. However, since this Government, it absolutely does not look like that anymore. It got worse and worse from Council to Council with each Government' (Representative of the Council on the Rights of the Child).

3.2 The Institution of Ombudsperson in the Republic of Serbia

Following the recommendations from General Comment No. 2 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2002) on the establishment and role of independent institutions for human rights, the Committee recommended to member states the establishment of an independent institution that would, in its mandate, be exclusively concerned with the protection of children's rights. The institution of the Protector of Citizens in our country represents a body that protects, promotes, and improves children's rights, among other things. In November 2021, the Republic of Serbia adopted a new Law on the Ombudsman of Citizens. Article 8 (paragraph 7) of this Law foresees the election of a deputy protector of citizens who assists the Protector and deals with the 'protection, promotion, and improvement of children's rights'. According to the Law, the Protector of Citizens appoints deputies after a public competition.

Article 28 specifies that children aged ten and over have the right to submit a complaint independently if their rights have been violated. Additionally, a complaint can be filed by a parent or guardian of a child or an association for the protection of children's rights, with the consent of the parent/guardian of the child or with the consent of a child who is at least ten years old. When submitting complaints, the process is not adapted for children, as there is no form intended for children on the Ombudsperson's website, which is not in accordance with international standards.

In our country, the adoption of a special Law on the Rights of the Child and the Defender of the Rights of the Child is currently in the making, as mentioned above.

'In several situations, the Ombudsman brought very good initiatives regarding the protection of children's rights, some specific issues that are important for children, in terms of parental alienation, how it is solved, what is being done, but there have been so few of these in the last ten years that that's incredible' (Representative of the Council on the Rights of the Child).

Per his jurisdiction's tasks, the Protector of Citizens has been organising the Panel of Young Advisors since 2010. The Panel represents a form of permanent participation of children in the work of the Protector of Citizens. Its primary role is to present to the Protector of Citizens, i.e., the Deputy, the problems that children and young people face, their thoughts, attitudes, proposals, and ideas for improving the position of children and young people in

our country. The number of young advisors is constant and consists of thirty children and young people aged 13 to 17 from all regions of the Republic of Serbia. They are elected by public invitation for two years, while new members are elected periodically or as needed. An equal number of girls and boys participate in the Panel's work, ensuring representation for vulnerable groups as well.

'A society that develops a democratic culture also takes into account the rights of the child and uses various mechanisms to improve them.

We prefer some other image of a child, not someone who is a subject of rights and participates in all relationships. On the one hand, children are highly protected, and on the other hand, they are very vulnerable' (Representative of Council on the Rights of the Child).

The Panel held its last meeting in 2019. During the meeting, the Protector of Citizens trained the Panel of Young Advisors to empower children to formulate and present ideas for solving local issues.

'The training focused on defining problems, setting goals for change, and outlining activities to achieve desired outcomes. A key part was teaching children to articulate their proposals and present them to decision-makers. Many children highlighted environmental concerns in their community and expressed a desire to address this issue locally' (Protector of Citizens).

At the end of 2020, the Protector of Citizens started implementing the project 'Children to Children - Know Your Rights.' The Summer School on Children's Rights was held in Novi Sad from September 12 to 16, 2022, as part of the project. Eighteen participants, primary and secondary school students, attended the summer school. The summer school aimed to improve the knowledge and understanding of children and young people about their rights and available protection mechanisms and promote participation as one of the four basic principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As part of the joint project of the Council of Europe and the European Union entitled 'Promotion of Diversity and Equality in the Republic of Serbia', the Protector of Citizens conducted research in schools on violence against vulnerable social groups in 2022. Members of the Panel of Young Advisors of the Protector of Citizens who had previously undergone training had the opportunity to learn from eminent experts in various fields about the position of members of various sensitive groups in our country, and they conducted the survey among peers. The survey was also conducted among teachers. The research's main findings and results were presented in the Special Report of the Protector of Citizens on violence in schools with recommendations addressed to competent institutions, published and presented at the end of 2023.

In interviews, the Protector of Citizens highlighted key challenges in executing activities within their mandate, particularly around children's rights. The primary issue lies in securing funding for promotional efforts, which currently depends heavily on project-based financing rather than consistent budget allocations.

'The challenge in the implementation of activities within the competence of the Protector of Citizens in the promotion of children's rights is most often related to the financing of promotional activities, which for now is mainly ensured through the project activities of the Protector of Citizens in the field of children's rights' (Protector of Citizens).

3.3 The Institution of Ombudsperson at the Level of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

Based on the Decision of the Provincial Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (2002), establishing the Provincial Ombudsman is foreseen. The first Vojvodina ombudsman was elected in 2003. The provincial ombudsman has four deputies, one of which is protecting children's rights. Within its jurisdiction, in 2023, this independent body formed the Children's Council as a permanent working body of this institution, consisting of male and female students of primary and secondary schools in AP Vojvodina. This body will be composed of 15 members between the ages of 13 and 18 whose task will be to inform the Protector about violations of children's rights, participate in various educational and research activities, and advise the ombudsman in the context of improving children's rights. The Children's Council was founded with the idea of a more active, direct, and meaningful involvement of children in the realisation and improvement of their rights, protection, and participation in decision-making and social life in general. This body has not recorded any activities so far.

3.4 Commissioner for the Protection of Equality

The Law on Prohibition of Discrimination in the Republic of Serbia provides for appointing a Commissioner for the Protection of Equality (2009, Article 28). In 2012, with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Commissioner established a Youth Panel within his competence, which still functions today. Panel members participate in various educational activities, programs, and workshops related to children and youth. The primary role of this body is to point out the needs of peers in the most adequate way, to influence the spread of ideas of tolerance and equality with the idea of creating a society without prejudices and stereotypes. The panel members are also advisers to the Commissioner for the protection of equality and get the opportunity to express their

opinions on various issues, such as discrimination and tolerance, especially within the family, school, and community where they live.

'Over the past year, panellists collaborated with the UN Population Fund to train our youth as peer educators. This initiative unfolded in six cities across Serbia, where the trained individuals subsequently imparted their knowledge to high school students. This approach has proven highly effective in engaging young people with human rights' (Representative of the Institution of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality).

The last competition available on the Commissioner's website, which states the necessary qualifications for membership in this body, is the 2018 competition. Within it, 25 children between the ages of 14 and 18 interested in the human rights field are invited to actively use the Internet and manage social networks. Although the Youth Panel is actively functioning, which can be concluded based on the described activities of this body during 2023, the method of selecting members and the length of their membership is not stated on the Commissioner's website. One of the challenges highlighted by the Commissioner's office is the issue of regularly appointing youth panellists.

'The varying school and extracurricular commitments of the youth often hinder their full attendance at meetings and their ability to fully commit to expressing their views on all relevant issues related to discrimination' (Representative of the institution of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality).

Within the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality institution, children can submit discrimination complaints independently through a specially adapted form for children and young people. This form is available on the institution's website. The Commissioner's office distributed a questionnaire on the participation of young people in local self-governments to determine the degree of involvement of young people under the age of 30 in the decision-making process in their communities.

'The results are devastating: In the positions of president and deputy president of the assembly and municipality, young people are below 2 %, and 65 municipalities in Serbia have youth representatives' (Representative of the institution of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality).

3.5 Committee on the Rights of The Child of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia

Based on the Law of the National Assembly (2010), the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly (Article 1) were adopted, which provided for the establishment of the Committee

on the Rights of the Child as a special permanent working body (Article 47). The chairman of the Committee is the chairman of the National Assembly, and the other members are the vice-chairmen of the National Assembly, representatives of parliamentary groups in the National Assembly, and the chairman of the Committee for Labor, Social Affairs, Social Inclusion, and Poverty Reduction. The competence of the Committee is to:

'Consider the draft law from the aspect of protection of children's rights, monitor the implementation and application of laws and other acts that regulate the position and protection of children's rights, check the alignment of national legislation with international standards of children's rights, cooperate with national and international institutions and bodies, as well as local authorities, initiate changes and amendments to regulations and propose the adoption of certain acts and measures to protect children's rights, promote children's rights and consider other issues of importance for children's rights' (Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly, 2012, Article 67).

According to the available data, the Committee held two sessions in 2023, discussing information on the work of the Ministry of Family Care and Demography. To a large extent, the Committee suffers from politicisation of topics and the relationship between political groups within the current convocation. The website has no information about further directions of work nor recommendations for future work. There is not a single child in the membership of this board.

3.6 Council for Youth

In accordance with the Law on Youth (2011), a decision of the Government in 2014 established a Council for Youth at the national level, chaired by the Minister of Tourism and Youth. The Council for Youth is part of the Youth Sector of the Ministry mentioned above, whose role is to take care of public policy documents related to youth and their rights, all based on the Law on Youth (2022).

'Our role is twofold: promoting rights and creating conditions for their fulfilment. We focus on designing measures and activities coordinating with others to improve the position of young people, especially those at risk of rights violations. It's crucial to prioritise concrete improvements alongside promotion efforts' (Representative of Ministry of Tourism and Youth and Council for Youth).

The convocation of the new Council from 2023 has 44 members, of which 23 are representatives of state authorities, one representative of youth authorities from AP Vojvodina, one joint representative of national councils of national minorities, one

distinguished expert, two representatives of youth offices and 16 representatives from youth ranks.

'According to our Strategy 2020-2030, by the end of its implementation, there will be 50% of young people in convocation... and the plan is to increase it. Then the youth can, when 12 of them get together, submit an initiative at any time to schedule a session of the Youth Council' (Representative of Ministry of Tourism and Youth and Council for Youth).

One of the main tasks of this advisory body of the Government is to ensure that the voice of young people is recognised and respected, with the aim that young people participate as much as possible in creating and implementing public policies. Youth initiatives within the Council for Youth related to participation have been diverse in the last two years. The Council dealt with topics such as youth activism, mental health, budget adoption, amendments to the Law on Youth, and policy decentralisation.

During our discussion regarding participation challenges, the interlocutor pointed out that it is crucial to follow and adequately implement the Strategy for Youth, in which participation is one of the goals. Establishing the obligation of all instruments of local youth policy, greater investments in youth spaces, digitalisation of the process of monitoring the work of civil society organizations, and adequate networking at the local level are priorities in the work of the Youth Sector of the Ministry of Tourism and Youth. Another highlight is the importance of working on improving the cultural context and social conditions that encourage activism and participation, stressing that it is essential that young people in that period of life have the opportunity to experience through personal experience that they can change something in their immediate environment, and that adults adequately support their participation.

'It is very important that this process is facilitated, that it is meaningful (mindful participation), that participation has preparation. After they have been asked for their opinion, it is important that there are follow-up activities that enable what they said to actually be so. Conditions must be created, among other things, for the young people who participate to be safe, to provide that safe space where they will be able to express themselves' (Representative of Ministry of Tourism and Youth and Council for Youth).

3.7 Youth Council of Autonomous Province Vojvodina

In Vojvodina, an autonomous province of the Republic of Serbia, there is a Youth Council of Autonomous Province Vojvodina, whose task is to improve the cooperation of local youth offices and encourage the development of interregional cooperation with various

youth policy actors. The Council has 11 members, including representatives of provincial secretariats, republic institutions, youth offices and centres, student organizations, and young people. The work of the Council is presided over by the provincial secretary for sports and youth.

4 Child Participation in Intergovernmental Organizations

In addition to promoting children's rights and empowering them to advocate for themselves and others, children's active participation in international organizations plays a crucial role in broadening their perspectives. By engaging with global issues, children are encouraged to recognise how challenges affect diverse individuals, communities, and cultures, which fosters empathy, understanding, and a sense of global responsibility. This engagement motivates them to contribute to positive change and equips them with active, compassionate leadership skills.

Furthermore, children's voices are invaluable in shaping policies that address the needs of young people, particularly those from vulnerable groups. Including children's insights in decision-making processes ensures that policies are grounded in the realities faced by young people today, resulting in more responsive and impactful initiatives. This collaboration between children and international organizations helps create better social conditions for future generations while nurturing well-rounded global citizens who uphold democratic values and contribute to a more inclusive and just world.

The following chapter will examine international organizations' cooperation, influence, and impact on child participation. This exploration will consider how these organizations support and empower children's involvement, their strategies to foster meaningful engagement, and the broader effects on global policy development and advocacy for children's rights.

4.1 UNICEF

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been one of the most important and recognised international organizations dealing with children's rights and welfare since 1946. The goal of UNICEF is to realise the full potential of children and young people while respecting the principles guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UNICEF Office in Serbia focuses on supporting reform processes in various areas such as early childhood development, education, social protection, and adolescent and youth development. All activities of this organization in the Republic of Serbia align with national development priorities. In Serbia, UNICEF cooperates with numerous civil society organizations, the academic community, the National Assembly, local communities, the private sector, families, and children. UNICEF supports and promotes participation in several ways.

'Through activities like Youth4Air on air quality, programs intended for young people to acquire new skills, improve mental health, we empower young activists to express their views and contribute to policy recommendations. We also set up innovative clubs and workshops for young people, enabling them to develop skills and influence local decision-makers. Through partnerships with organizations and government bodies, we encourage young people to actively engage in actions to improve air quality and preserve the environment. In addition, we use tools like U-Report to gather the opinions of young people and organise educational campaigns through social networks to raise awareness of the importance of participation among young people' (Representative of UNICEF office).

One of UNICEF's goals also relates to empowering young people to be active members of their communities and influencing decision-making that affects their lives at all levels. In this context, UNICEF cooperates with numerous ministries in charge of creating and implementing youth policies, supporting young people in exercising their rights, being active members of society, and participating in decision-making. UNICEF is working to establish a long-term strategy to raise awareness among young people about their right to participate in issues that concern them, strengthening critical thinking, democratic and civic values, and trust in society. Special attention is paid to the inclusion of sensitive social groups such as girls, members of the Roma national minority, and children with developmental disabilities. To increase young people's visibility and ensure their voices are heard, UNICEF has created several platforms such as 'U Report' and 'Volunteers Online' to express their opinions and ideas on various topics. In this way, UNICEF works to develop different skills among young people, empower them, encourage meaningful volunteering, and improve the quality of their lives. In addition to internet activities, UNICEF has been implementing the UPSHIFT project for several years, aimed at young people aged 13 to 24, whose goal is to solve environmental and social challenges. UPSHIFT initiates and empowers young people, giving them access to knowledge and skills to be actively involved in proposing solutions and solving problems in their community.

The Youth Committee supports the work of UNICEF and the Program for the Development of Adolescents and Youth. The Youth Committee is a body composed of children/youth aged 14 to 24 who participate in designing various initiatives and projects with the aim of greater involvement of young people in consultation processes when making decisions on multiple issues and public policies for young people. The Youth Committee is part of UNICEF's advocacy activities with the idea of ensuring that as many children as possible are informed about inclusive opportunities for participation and that the opinions of children and young people are seriously taken into account when making various strategic decisions. The board recommends organising training sessions for the peer group to acquire new knowledge and skills for applying innovative solutions.

UNICEF has supported numerous publications, among which are the publication of the Judicial Academy in the organization of training for judges who act in family matters on the application of the principle of children's participation in these proceedings, as well as the publication 'Engaged and Heard'- Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement (UNICEF, 2020).

'We believe that it is necessary for young people to be involved in decision-making processes and to be given the opportunity to express their views and needs. UNICEF, in coordination with the state sector, non-profit organizations, and businesses, advocates for the creation of inclusive and sustainable communities in which the rights of children and young people are respected and in which they have the opportunity to actively contribute to social change' (Representative of UNICEF office).

Despite UNICEF's extensive efforts to promote child rights, several challenges persist. A significant obstacle is the inclusion of marginalised youth groups, such as those with disabilities, Roma, LGBTQI+ youth, and those living in poverty.

These groups often encounter additional barriers to engagement and are frequently overlooked in decision-making processes. Thus, ensuring our programs and initiatives are accessible and inclusive for all young people, irrespective of their socioeconomic status or other disadvantages, remains a primary challenge' (Representative of UNICEF office).

4.2 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child comprises 18 independent experts overseeing the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the accompanying Optional Protocols. All States parties to the Convention must submit regular periodic reports to the Committee on implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child every five years. The Committee then reviews each report and provides guidance and recommendations to member states regarding respect for children's rights. An integral part of the periodic report and recommendations of the Committee also refers to respecting the right to participation within various areas and systems. The Republic of Serbia prepared the last report from 2017 to 2021. This body can consider individual complaints related to violations of children's rights under the Convention and optional protocols. Additional activities of the Committee refer to the publication of General comments, i.e., the interpretation of various provisions on human and children's rights. Children from the Republic of Serbia were among the first in the world to participate in reporting before the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee evaluated their

reporting on implementing the Optional Protocols as a model of good practice, highlighting the importance of full participation of children and young people.

4.3 Save the Children in North West Balkans

Save the Children in North West Balkans implements various program activities in the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, with a vision in which every child realises the right to life, protection, development, and participation. It has actively supported the Center for Child Rights in various initiatives, including the establishment and activities of Club DX. Additionally, Save the Children has been involved in numerous events throughout Serbia and the region that advocate for children's active participation. Notably, the publication 'World Tailored to a Child' captures the unfiltered perspectives of children expressing their wishes for the world. It's important to note that most of these activities occurred before 2016, and unfortunately, recent Save the Children activities in Serbia lack comprehensive documentation. On a positive note, the Save the Children in North West Balkan office has collaborated with NGO Atina and Group 484 to produce a publication focusing on children's participation in migration decision-making. This publication emphasises child rights and places participation at the forefront of its central themes.

Furthermore, Save the Children in North West Balkan has undertaken various research projects to explore migration experiences for children on the western Balkan route. The organization engaged with children in a child-friendly and consultative manner during this process. Despite these efforts, there remains a substantial need to address child rights and participation in child protection, not only for migrant children but also for resident children in Serbia. No available data indicates whether any initiatives have been implemented to promote these aspects in Serbia.

4.4 Regional Cooperation Council

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) includes 46 members, the countries of Southeast Europe, members of the international community, and donors, who work together to develop a political climate of dialogue, promoting tolerance and openness. This cooperation framework enables the implementation of various regional programs aimed at the economic and social development of the people and countries of the region. Through regional action, the RCC promotes European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In 2020, the 'Western Balkans Youth Lab' (WBYL) project was implemented within the framework of the RCC, aiming to improve opportunities for the participation of young people from the

Western Balkan countries in decision-making. The project activities created a stable and long-term dialogue between youth organizations and national administrations with a focus on developing policies that open up space for greater involvement of young people in decision-making. In three years (2020–2023), two workshops were conducted in Serbia – one related to unemployment and the other to mental health. Through these, young people could get involved in a series of activities. The result of this process was the formulation of the pilot program 'Youth Guarantee in Serbia' and advocating for establishing a national coordinating body to deal with all critical issues related to young people's mental health.

4.5 Regional Office for Youth Cooperation

The Regional Office for Youth Cooperation (RYCO) is an organization whose mission is to promote regional and intercultural cooperation between the founding countries of the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo. Through various types of projects and programs, RYCO opens opportunities for young people to participate in as many activities as possible with the aim of building mutual understanding and reconciliation, democracy, and social and economic prosperity in the countries of the Western Balkans. The 2022–2024 strategic plan of this institutional mechanism includes the creation of a basis for the highest possible level of youth participation in policy-making and advocacy. A large part of the financial resources of this organization is supposed to finance numerous projects of organizations and schools from Serbia (Jokic, 2024). RYCO strives to involve youth in decision-making at all levels, starting with its Governing Board, the highest decision-making body in this organization. Serbia currently does not have a representative on the Governing Board. In 2021, RYCO signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the KOMS.

5 Child Participation within Non-Governmental Organizations

In Serbia, non-governmental organizations prioritising children's right to participation are dedicated to creating inclusive spaces, empowering young voices across all significant processes, and ensuring that children's perspectives are valued and respected. These organizations actively involve children in the planning, execution, and evaluation phases of their projects, which range from educational initiatives to policy advocacy. Through these activities, children are not merely beneficiaries but are transformed into crucial contributors, strengthening the relevance and impact of NGO programs addressing their needs.

However, NGOs frequently encounter challenges and barriers when working to facilitate child participation. These challenges can include limited access to decision-making spaces, cultural and systemic barriers that undervalue youth perspectives, and insufficient financial resources for sustainable youth engagement. NGOs often face difficulties advocating for child participation within broader society, where the concept may not be universally understood or accepted. To address these issues, they propose actionable solutions emphasising the importance of children's right to participate, underscoring its role in shaping inclusive societies. Many of these NGOs educate professionals, parents, and the general public, raise awareness of the value of child participation, and provide training that promotes respectful, informed dialogue with youth.

This chapter will provide an overview of these influential NGOs in Serbia, examining their strategies, successes, and challenges in advocating child participation. It will also highlight the essential partnerships and collaborative efforts with international organizations, further enhancing the NGOs' capacity to promote children's rights. Together, these organizations play a critical role in developing policies and practices that recognise and actively incorporate children's perspectives, contributing to a more democratic society and empowering the next generation as active citizens.

5.1 Center for Children's Rights

The Center for Children's Rights (CCR) is a Serbian NGO founded in 1977, dedicated to promoting children's rights based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. CCR works to create legislative, institutional, and strategic frameworks for child protection and active participation. Over the past 25 years, it has conducted over 1,500 training sessions for professionals and children. CCR operates mainly in Serbia but collaborates regionally

and internationally as part of Eurochild and MODS. A key achievement is establishing a system to monitor and report on children's rights in Serbia, including developing indicators and alternative reports in collaboration with ministries. CCR actively involves children in its processes, allowing them to give input on recommendations through online platforms. The organization also supports self-organised youth groups and has published various materials on child participation, justice, education, and safety. Children participate in preparing the contents, brochures, and applications in different ways through focus groups, advisory boards, etc.

'Our organization is dedicated to the protection, promotion, and realisation of children's rights in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our mission is to empower children and young people, enable their participation in social processes, and ensure that their voices are heard and respected' (Representative of the organization).

Besides the achieved results, the Center for Child Rights is also dealing with some of the impediments, such as children are generally not involved in the adoption of policies that concern them; organizations dealing with the promotion of children's rights and participation often face a lack of financial and human resources; lack of political will to promote and support Centers activities; the complexity of the system that enables child's participation (e.g., complaint procedure, appeal, etc.). However, there are established ways of dealing with this obstacle, such as:

'CCR overcomes these challenges through active engagement in educating the public about children's rights, advocating for changes in policies and laws that support children's participation, as well as establishing cooperation with relevant institutions for more effective implementation of programs and projects aimed at improving the position of children. Also, CCR is continuously working on capacity building at the local level to ensure that child participation is an integral part of the decision-making process that affects them' (Representative of the organization).

5.2 Užice Child Rights Centre

The Užice Child Rights Centre (UCRC) is a non-governmental, non-profit, and non-political organization founded in 1998 to improve children's position in society by promoting children's rights, per the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This organization works on monitoring and implementing children's and human rights while creating, developing, and implementing public policies related to human and children's rights in different systems, mainly in the education and social protection systems. UCRC conducted a series of training

sessions for civil society and various institutions and public services to promote education and capacity building in the sphere of human and children's rights.

UCRC is part of and one of the leading members of the Coalition for Monitoring Children's Rights in Serbia and actively participates in preparing reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Republic of Serbia.

'Within the Coalition, we are divided, and each one covers the area that is part of the organization's expertise. We are looking at how to prepare that 'Child report' because it is a form of participation and an opportunity to hear how children reflect on certain topics and recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. When it comes to the presentation of the children's report in Geneva before the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the children are involved; they choose who will be their representative, and then we get to know the whole process of what it will look like' (Representative of the organization).

In addition to the principles of inclusion and gender equality, UCRC is guided by the principle of children's participation in its work, thus enabling children to participate in the planning, implementing, and evaluating of all the activities it carries out. Participatory youth groups composed mainly of high school students are integral to the organization. The organization realises various education on numerous topics, often determined by the students.

One of the strategic goals of the UCRC is to establish effective mechanisms for children's participation in decision-making processes and to respect children's views in all matters that directly concern them. With this aim, the UCRC developed and published the documents: 'Indicators of the Realisation of Children's Rights in Education' (Vučković-Šahović et al., 2018) and 'Analysis of Public Policy with Recommendations for its Improvement' (Žunić, Cicvarić, 2019) with a proposal for the Rulebook on the participation and information of students in primary education and the same in 2020 forwarded to the Council on the Rights of the Child for an opinion. For many reasons, the proposal has not yet been on the agenda of the Council for Children's Rights.

'Young people as well as experts of various profiles were involved in the preparation of this document. This document was recognised by the Ministry of Education as an important tool and instrument that means to them in the process of external evaluation of the school. We conducted training for both the Ministry of Education and the Institute for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education and Training, as well as the Institute for the Improvement of Education and Training. We also conducted indicator training with all municipal, republican, and provincial inspectors (still a weak link for us). About 80% of employees in 17 school administrations at the level of Serbia, who actually monitor the achievement of the quality of education in schools, where participation is an

integral part of the achievement of quality, underwent training' (Representative of the organization).

During the interview, the respondent pointed out that the student Parliament is not and must not be the only mechanism for children's participation in school. Among professionals who work in education, but also among children, there is still a prejudice that the domain of student decision-making refers only to non-curricular activities (gardening, landscaping). The Indicators mentioned above also suggest that the activities of the student Parliament should never be such that they only reflect on the older students but create an atmosphere in the school where there is space to hear what the first-year student has to say and to look for methods that will support inclusion of younger children.

'It is something that is really very, very problematic, not problematic, but it is a material mistake. Students have the right to participate in the decision-making process in all matters that directly or indirectly concern them. What it means? This means that they are very concerned about the curriculum and content, the way of processing certain contents in the class, they are very concerned about the work methods that the teachers will use in the class' (Representative of the organization).

An important segment of the work of this organization is the advocacy activities aimed at making policymakers put the topic of participation on the agenda, either in adopting regulations and laws or activities that should contribute to greater compliance with existing legislation in practice.

'We are advocating that the Law on the Rights of the Child be passed. This would provide us with good positions to advocate more strongly that participation should be an integral part of work with children and young people in general. Participation is like a kind of precondition... at every level, we encounter decoration, manipulation, and quasi-representatives. Exercising any right is impossible without participation. It is important for us to make people aware that there is no other right if we do not consider children as active subjects of their own development. Not even among professionals who would be expected to have a high level of awareness on this issue, it is still in the zone of further development, figuratively speaking.' (Representative of the organization).

When we discussed the challenges to realising this right, the interlocutor stated that these are most often 'the social climate, traditional patterns, mistrust, negative attitudes of adults towards participation, the perception that it is a threat to the authority of adults, numerous misconceptions about participation. One of them is that participation is like a reward ('Well, we will let you participate because you will participate if you deserve it or if you are responsible'), where they do not understand at all that it is not cause and effect, but that it is a mutual process. We have problem with adults with understanding why participation is

not a reward, but rather a model by which you raise a child, teach him responsibility, critical thinking' (Representative of the organization).

Regarding the subsequent activities, the interlocutor points out that working on complementary education for children's rights from the earliest age is important, highlighting kindergartens and parents as a good base. Suppose the teacher in the kindergarten works by respecting and listening to the needs of the children. In that case, the parents' education should also be directed towards a style that nurtures and respects the children's opinions.

5.3 Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia (MODS)

The Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia (MODS) represents an alliance of member organizations protecting and promoting children's rights in Serbia. MODS has over 100 members, and the mission of this association is to improve the position and the quality of life of children in our country. MODS stands for a society of equality, a society without discrimination, violence, abuse and neglect and a society in which all children have equal access to education, health and social protection and a healthy environment in which they live. Various research projects, numerous publications and practical policies were published under the auspices of MODS.

An example of good practice in the context of the right to participation is the implementation of the 'Get Started' project (2021), which is the result of cooperation between the Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia, the Center for Youth Integration (CIM), the SOS Children's Village Foundation of Serbia, Edulink and Niš Open Club. The project aimed to include as many children and young people as possible, including children from marginalised social groups (boys and girls of the Roma national minority, with developmental difficulties, without parental care, and at risk of poverty), in the creation of policies to reduce inequality in society. As part of the project, 257 children and young people (up to 18 years of age) from 12 cities in Serbia were included in the consultation process to find out to what extent children perceive inequality, how they understand it, what forms they distinguish and what ideas they have about its reduction. The recommendations of children and young people are integrated into the recommendation of the MODS for the Program of Economic Reforms that Serbia prepares every year on the way to membership in the European Union. Also, a report with proposals for children and young people was presented to the Council for Children's Rights of the Government of the Republic of Serbia in 2022.

The organization is able to make an impact through its partner organizations, and this is really a benefit and the advantage of our work is the ability to reach out to numerous children through our partners.

Our biggest difficulty and something that became irritating for us is the attitude of the educational staff who connect child rights with their obligations and obedience. I feel frustrated that I need to repeat all over again that child rights to express their opinion is not conditional and shouldn't be' (Representative of the organization).

5.4 Praxis

Praxis is a non-profit, non-governmental organization founded in 2004 dedicated to the protection of human rights through the provision of legal protection and through public advocacy for the removal of all obstacles in accessing and exercising rights. This organization monitors public policies, conducts various research and analyses, and recommends comprehensive systemic changes in multiple areas. Praxis is a member of the MODS and working groups for developing the National Action Plan for Children (NAPC) and early development. In 2017, Praxis was a Council for Children's Rights member. In addition to activities in the sphere of status and socioeconomic rights, anti-discrimination, migration and public administration reform, one of the program units that Praxis deals with is children's rights. Praxis is committed to monitoring the implementation of regulations and policies, public advocacy, promoting children's rights, following the child's best interests, and proclaiming international principles and standards.

An example of good practice in the context of participation is the project 'Tomorrow Begins Today', implemented in 5 cities in cooperation with the Association of Music Art - Music Art project in 2019, which resulted in the publication 'Support for the Development of children's participation - practical work with children' of early school age' (Lazarević, 2021). The goal of the project was to improve the participation of citizens, civil society organizations, and especially children and young people in the creation of public policies, as well as improving the situation in terms of respecting the principles of transparency and responsibility in the work of public administration, especially at the level of local self-government units. The project aims to improve consultative mechanisms to design inclusive local policies, especially those related to children's rights. The project also addressed marginalisation and social exclusion issues to reduce prejudice and discrimination among children, thus creating an inclusive society. The practicum, as mentioned earlier, is intended for teachers from elementary schools in Serbia, offering them practical advice for including the basic elements of participation in the school curriculum so that students develop knowledge and skills in this area from the earliest days and actively contribute to the creation of a social environment in the communities in which they live. The practicum contains examples from other countries, their experiences involving children in decision-making, and guidelines in workshop activities.

5.5 OPENS

The organization OPENS from Novi Sad represents the Alliance of Associations founded in 2016, which, through a series of projects, activities and initiatives, works with partners to empower young people, people who work with them, youth organizations and organizations for young people. OPENS works on community awareness and youth policy development. This organization aims to encourage young people to get actively involved in the community in which they live. The goals are achieved through various mechanisms, programs, advocacy, and four basic program units: transformation of youth policy, sensitisation of actors of youth policy and the community, revitalisation of the civil sector, and direct work with young people. For members of student Parliaments, OPENS organises a **participation school** through which students have the opportunity to learn about the existing mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making. Within the framework of participatory budgeting as a form of participatory democracy, OPENS implemented several projects, including 'Get involved, find a solution' in 2018. In this way, high school students from the territory of the municipality of Novi Sad had the opportunity to directly participate in creating the environment in their school and thus influence the spending of budget funds. Implementing such projects opens up the possibility of a direct response to the actual needs of young people, who, at the same time, develop an awareness of the needs of others and the well-being of the entire community.

5.6 Becej Youth Association

The Becej Youth Association (BUM) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization focused on meeting the needs of young people in the territory of the municipality of Becej through the organization of various humanitarian, environmental, educational, sports and cultural activities. A proactive social community in which citizens, especially young people, initiate changes represents the vision and mission of this organization. Through various program activities, BUM works to develop the potential of young people, their activism, and the promotion of rights. It is also one of the pioneers in introducing participatory budgeting in our country. As part of the project 'Toward Greater Participation of Young People in Decision-making Processes at the Local Level', which is implemented with the support of the Ministry of Tourism and Youth of the Republic of Serbia, the guidebook 'Sweet Side of Change - guidebook for participatory serving of the local budget to the taste of young people' (Đekić, 2024) was published, which intended for all local self-government units that want to involve young people in the process of drafting the local budget in the most efficient way possible. This project represents the basis for the realisation of particular goals foreseen in the current Youth Strategy 2023-2030 and in the context of the participation of young people in decisions concerning the consumption of funds from the local budget, also intended for them.

5.7 Union of High School Students of Serbia (UNSS)

The Union of High School Students of Serbia (UNSS) is an example of good practice in the Republic of Serbia. It is a national youth organization founded in 2003 to represent high school students nationally and internationally. Today, it has 196 member student parliaments from 76 cities and municipalities in Serbia, meaning that this organization represents about 110,000 high school students. During the interview, the interlocutor explained how this body functions at the mentioned levels.

'At the national level, the Union is governed by high school students elected from member schools. These elected representatives serve as voices for the entire network. This democratic structure enables these students to continue influencing our interactions with ministries, donors, institutions, both nationally and internationally. Internationally, the Union collaborates with the European Organization of High School Students (OBESSU), as well as with the European Union and the Council of Europe and their respective institutions. These partnerships allow us to engage in popular educational initiatives that have a significant impact' (Representative of the organization).

Additionally, the Union of High School Students of Serbia cooperates at the regional level with organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which share similar educational systems and levels of youth participation. This type of cooperation is crucial because it allows the sharing of experiences and improving participation mechanisms.

The UNSS orients its strategic ideas towards creating a platform for the active participation of high school students and their organizational structures in the advocacy, implementation and monitoring of public policies to educate young people. This organization seeks to empower young people to participate in decision-making and community engagement. This aspect underscores the advocacy component, one of the two core programs.

'Our primary focus and priority lies in amplifying the voices of high school students across all spheres, extending beyond mere participation in decision-making processes. We aspire to ensure their voices resonate throughout all aspects of life' (Representative of the organization).

The second program entails community engagement, involving collaboration with teachers, fellow students, educators, parents, and citizens. The program includes educational and informational initiatives aimed at interacting directly with diverse civic groups.

'On another level, we engage with the broader community, including local self-government units and various institutions, to assist our member schools and

individuals in realising their initiatives, actions, proposals, or addressing problems. We aim to facilitate their interaction with local self-government authorities' (Representative of the organization).

The Union continuously participates in activities related to changes in the normative framework related to education and the participation of young people in the educational process. The impact on the normative framework was an amendment of the Law on the Basic System of Education and Training. In 2010/2011, The Union participated in the change of this Law with the aim that students have representatives and the right to vote in the school board, to introduce the obligation of the student Parliament as well as for high school students to have two representatives of members of the Union in the National Education Council.

'What later, unfortunately, changed in 2016/2017 is that most things were cancelled precisely because somewhere the policy was aimed at reducing the participation of students in school, so these are some systemic changes that were cancelled to some extent' (Representative of the organization).

The interlocutor pointed out that the challenges are a complex interplay of social and systemic factors that often hinder sustained efforts in specific areas, such as education or youth issues.

'The effectiveness of our work largely depends on the openness of institutions, the presence of systemic mechanisms, the availability of institutional frameworks, and adequate funding. Therefore, we cannot expect that a system that does not even try to adapt to the needs of those for whom it exists will motivate them to want something' (Representative of the organization).

Ultimately, the challenge lies in maintaining momentum to address youth-related issues continuously. Problems arise and fade away, but the individuals affected by these issues - the young people - also come and go.

'In our case, working with high school students who are typically only part of our network for a short period of time poses additional challenges. We lack regular communication channels with decision-makers to consistently address emerging issues. Limited financial support further hampers our ability to sustain existing initiatives and infrastructure, let alone build upon them' (Representative of the organization).

As a result of the research work of this organization and in line with all the challenges above, the first national 'Declaration of High School Students on the Quality of Education and Active Participation' was adopted. This document presents the most important values

high school students in Serbia stand for, highlighting the requirements whose fulfilment would result in better education and active participation of young people in schools.

5.8 Youth Umbrella Organization (KOMS)

The highest independent youth representative body (KOMS) is an alliance of 111 youth associations for youth, whose advocacy platform is a link between young people, member organizations and various decision-makers (state and institutions). The mission of KOMS is to develop a partnership relationship with the state, develop intersectoral and international cooperation, and encourage the active participation of young people. The activities of this organization aim to represent the interests of young people, promote public advocacy for improving the position of young people and realising their rights, and analyse public policies to propose meaningful changes. The umbrella association has the right to propose candidates for the Youth Council, as well as to participate in the process of drafting and implementing the Youth Strategy and other documents in the field of youth policy.

Since 2020, KOMS has been implementing the 'Decision House' program as part of the 'Voice of Youth in Democratic Processes' project, which brings together representatives of local self-government units (municipalities and cities), student parliaments and civil society organizations (associations) with the ultimate goal of improving youth policy and cooperation with young people in their local communities, and inclusion in the network of local coordinators for dialogue with young people. Local coordinators are representatives of local self-governments, student parliaments, and associations who, through a special process, are trained to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to improve the work of institutions and bodies representing young people and bring about expected changes in local communities. Local coordinators receive local training to implement the EU dialogue methodology since the program is part of the more comprehensive 'Civil Society for the Improvement of Serbia's Access to the European Union' project. So far, 16 trained coordinators at the local level are conducting dialogue with young people, with the tendency to expand this number to involve as many young people as possible in decision-making and cooperation with relevant institutions in the local community.

In 2019, KOMS launched an initiative to form a National Working Group for Structured Dialogue within the Republic of Serbia Youth Council. It formed this body in 2021 when Serbia became the first country outside the European Union to apply the EU dialogue mechanism for youth. The national working group comprises representatives of the KOMS, the Ministry of Tourism and Youth, the Ministry of European Integration, the National Association of Youth Work Practitioners (NAPOR) and the Tempus Foundation. The activities of this body are mainly financed by the Youth Umbrella Organization, the Tempus

Foundation and the Belgrade Open School, and it rarely participates in the EU dialogue cycle for young people within the European Union.

As one of the functional mechanisms for the effective inclusion of young people, KOMS sees through the organization of the so-called dialogue with decision-makers. In 2019, this mechanism gave birth to the first dialogue, opening many thematic areas of interest to young people. From 2019 to 2023, three more dialogues were held with the Prime Minister, which resulted in proposals within the spheres of interest of young people, i.e. public policies in health, employment, youth policy, etc. In the same period, dialogues were also organised with the Minister responsible for youth (2020/2021), the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality (2021), the Minister of Human and minority rights (2021) and young members of the National Assembly (2020). In the following years, some civil society organizations (Belgrade Center for Human Rights) and local youth organizations under the mentoring support of KOMS and organised meetings/dialogues with various government ministers implemented this initiative.

The Youth Umbrella Organization has published several documents concerning promoting youth participation rights. The publication 'Participate Actively' (Marković, 2017) exists to improve the level of information among young people about the value of active participation, especially in decisions concerning their lives. The brochure targets all young people to bring them closer to the importance of active participation and inform them where and how they can participate in the work of informal groups, student parliaments, various associations, political parties and trade unions. The publication aims to offer young people ways to fight for their rights, influence the improvement of the position of young people in the social community and represent their interests at the local or national level. The idea is for this brochure to be available to youth in youth offices and the premises of civil society organizations and informal groups.

'Minimum Standards for Youth Participation in Decision-making Processes in Local Communities' (KOMS, 2017) is a joint publication of the KOMS and its partners: The Ministry of Youth and Sports, the National Association of Youth Work Practitioners, the National Association of Youth Offices and the Permanent conferences of cities and municipalities. The publication intends to encourage a discussion in the Republic of Serbia about what needs to be improved at the local level so that we can claim that the community actively monitors and listens to the needs of young people. It consults, encourages and respects them as relevant interlocutors in decision-making processes. The publication is for decision-makers at the city and municipal levels, institutions, civil society organizations, and youth groups. It serves as a reminder that valuing the voices of young people reflects the essence of a democratic society. One of the goals of the publication is to launch an advocacy campaign to implement these standards into the laws of the Republic of Serbia, especially the Law on Youth, the Law on Local Self-Governments, the Law on Public Institutions, and local documents, statutes of municipalities and cities, public companies and institution.

The KOMS distributed this document to all municipalities, cities and urban municipalities in the Republic of Serbia and the City of Belgrade to implement it realistically.

Every year, KOMS publishes the document 'Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Young People in the Republic of Serbia', which partly includes research on the participation of young people in political and social life. The latest report for 2023 highlights the education system, youth values, critical thinking, and mental health as the biggest problems facing young people (Stojanović, Ivković, Kaličanin, 2023). These areas stand out as areas where young people want to act and have their opinions taken into consideration.

'This is where young people see their key role, but, unfortunately, they are aware that the political system does not allow them to make decisions, so we have the devastating data that only 0.7% of young people, out of all those surveyed, believe that the political system allows them to express themselves and that they influence decision-making, and that's where we noticed that mistrust grows with age' (Representative of the organization).

The interlocutor highlights the lack of information among young people as a key obstacle to participation. She points out that *'everyone believes that work should be done on the reform of subjects such as Civic Education and the Constitution and the rights of citizens'*, which would in some way serve as a platform for informing students about the possibilities of social activism and participation. The role of teaching staff is also highlighted as important in this information process since they can represent a link between formal and informal education.

Another challenge is the exclusion of young people because of their age, because 'if they wanted to get involved in the sphere of activism or even politics, they can't because of older people who perceive them as insufficiently experienced, and then it bothers young people because they don't see themselves as a force that makes decisions' (Representative of the organization).

The KOMS, together with the umbrella organizations of the countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo) and the Institute for Regional Cooperation and Development (CDI), participates in the implementation of the regional youth platform (Connecting Youth) which offers space for young people, their actions and initiatives.

6 Through Their Eyes: Children's Role in Decision-Making

The following section presents the findings from the 'Through Their Eyes' questionnaire, which provides an in-depth look into children's perspectives on their participation in decision-making processes. This survey aimed to capture young people's experiences and insights into how effectively they feel involved in decisions impacting their lives and identify gaps in current practices within family, educational, and community settings. By gathering data directly from children and adolescents, the study aimed to understand how they perceive their role in influencing decisions, the extent to which they feel heard, and any obstacles they face in actively participating.

'Through Their Eyes' sheds light on essential factors that shape children's participation, from supportive relationships with adults to accessible opportunities for expressing opinions in matters that affect them. This data not only reflects the realities faced by young people but also highlights areas for improvement in policy and practice to ensure their voices are genuinely valued. The findings provide valuable insights for stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and non-governmental organizations, on creating more inclusive, child-centred approaches in decision-making frameworks. Ultimately, this analysis underscores the importance of empowering children as active participants in shaping their environments, building a foundation for enhanced well-being, and fostering a sense of responsibility and agency from an early age.

6.1 Questionnaire Results

The quantitative part of the research was conducted from January to mid-March 2024, with 55 children and youth participating in the questionnaire. The participants were drawn from three regions of Serbia: North (Vojvodina), Center (Belgrade), and South (Jagodina). Primarily, the children in the sample fell within the age range of 14 to 17 years old, with the majority being 14 years old. The sample was gender-balanced, with slightly more females (31) included in the total sample. The research was carried out in three high schools and three primary schools: Braća Baruh, Milan Mijalković, and Zdravko Čelar (grammar schools), as well as Svetozar Marković, Poljoprivredna škola Bać, and Zemunska Gimnazija.

A significant proportion of the children (78.2%) indicated they were familiar with child rights. Among the rights mentioned, the children most frequently addressed the right to education, healthcare, and the right to express their views and opinions. Some children

also highlighted the right to be protected against violence, the right to privacy and protection of personal data, and the right to play, rest, and self-expression. Furthermore, children were asked about their awareness of specific rights, including the right to freedom of expression and speech, the right to association and freedom of assembly, the right to privacy, the right to access information regarding their lives, and the right to have their best interests considered in all matters concerning them. More than 90% of children have heard about the right to privacy, while only 54.5% of the sample pool heard about best interest assessment in the decision-making process. The right to express opinion and be informed was known to 87.3% of children. Right to association and freedom of assembly was represented among 76.4% of participants.

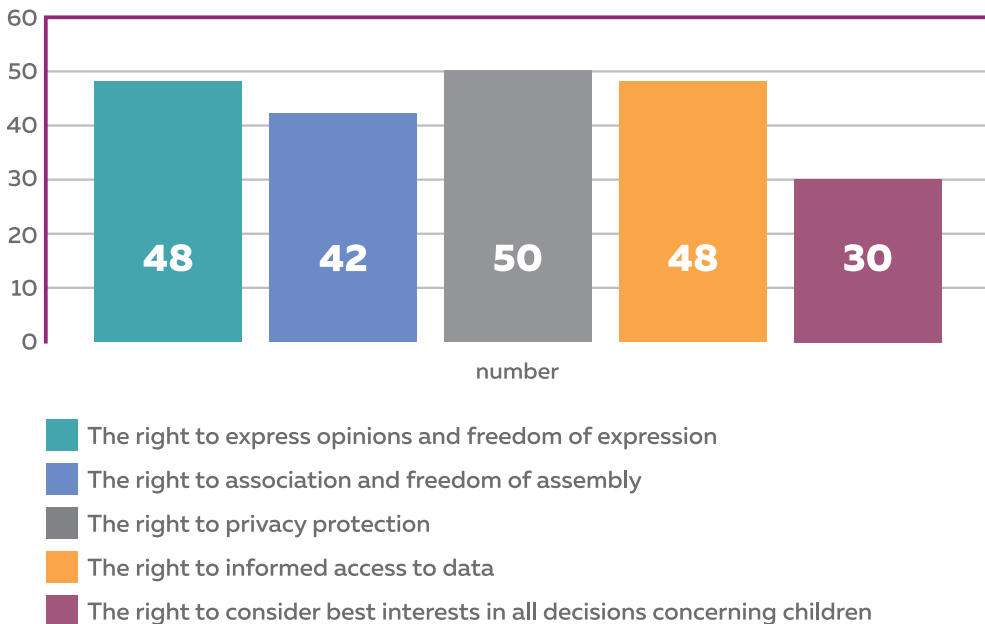


Chart 1. *Children's awareness of specific rights*

In the following section, children were queried about the locations where they were solicited for their views and opinions. Predominantly, children reported being consulted within their families (94.5%), although this figure decreased slightly within school environments (74.5%). Additionally, children were asked whether they were consulted in other settings significant to them, with the majority stating they were asked for their views among their peer groups (N=12) and during their sports activities (N=13). Notably, one respondent said, 'I am consulted for my opinions in various societal settings and gatherings.' In contrast, another respondent expressed uncertainty, stating, 'I am not sure where else I could provide my opinion.' Moreover, children were queried about the methods through which they were consulted for their views and opinions.

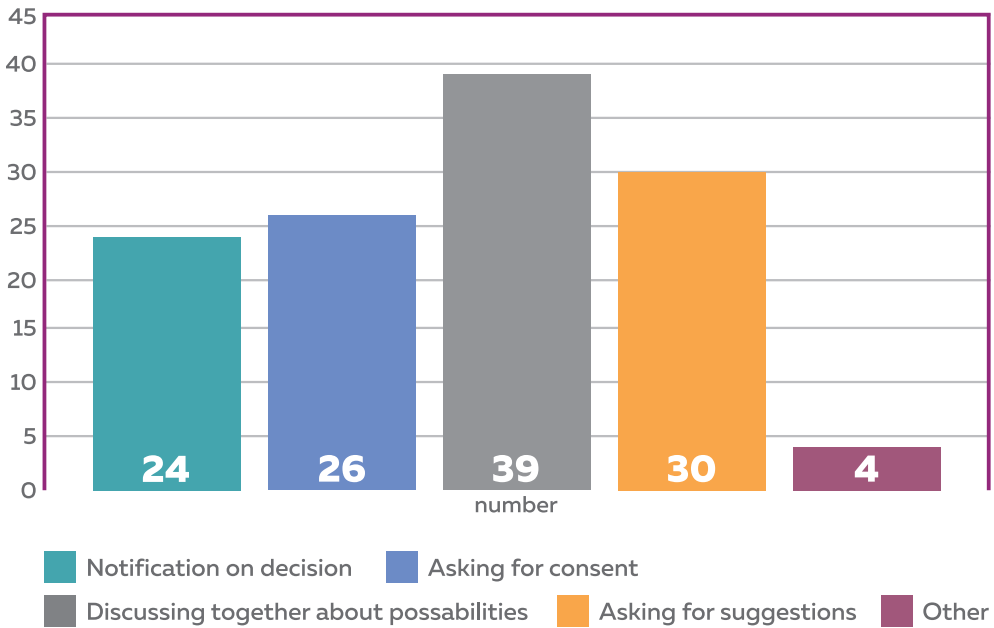


Chart 2. Which way were you asked for an opinion?

Most children indicated engagement in discussions about possibilities with adults (N=39), while many (N=30) reported being asked for their suggestions on various topics. Conversely, fewer children (N=24) mentioned being informed about decisions made for them by adults. Regarding extracurricular activities, 85.5% of children stated they are encouraged to participate, with just under half (49.1%) occupying leadership positions such as class president or deputy. However, this was the least represented affirmative response on the questionnaire.

Three-quarters of respondents (76.4%) stated that they are encouraged to express their opinions in class and during school meetings, primarily by professors (N=13), class teachers (N=10), and the school director (N=5), as well as by classmates and friends (N=6). However, one child felt unsupported, stating, 'No one is asking us anything; no one cares at all.' When asked how they participate in decision-making at school, most mentioned participation in the student parliament (N=11) or sharing their opinions in the classroom (N=10). Some respondents (N=3) mentioned participation through questionnaires or giving consent, while one child expressed feeling pressured.

Regarding activities promoting participation at school, while some respondents were unsure or felt there were no such activities, others mentioned specific initiatives such as the student parliament, sports teams, choir, and other extracurricular activities.

In the section on family participation, most students (N=44) reported that their families respect their views, albeit to varying degrees. Nearly all respondents (100%) stated that

their families appreciate their views and ideas, with the majority (89.1%) indicating that they are included in family debates and the reorganization of family chores. Moreover, a high percentage (94.5%) reported that their parents or caretakers encourage them to participate in activities of interest such as sports, hobbies, or other social activities.

When asked how they participate in family decision-making, most children reported making joint agreements (N=11) or offering suggestions and propositions (N=22). Fewer provided unclear responses, while only one child mentioned their mother making decisions. Overall, there were no negative responses regarding the decision-making processes within families.

Regarding participation in community settings, most respondents (76.4%) indicated their community involvement. However, only slightly more than half (52.7%) stated that they have participated in community service and volunteering work. Additionally, around two-thirds of respondents (63.6%) felt their voices were respected regarding community matters.

Nevertheless, responses varied when asked who includes children in the decision-making process. Eleven respondents mentioned family and parents, while seven stated no one included them. Two respondents did not provide an answer, and other responses included 'everyone' (N=3), 'friends' (N=5), 'no one' (N=3), 'people around,' and one respondent mentioned not belonging to any community, highlighting the diversity of relationships children foster within their communities.

Regarding how children participate in community decision-making, most mentioned making suggestions (N=15), while some mentioned reaching a joint agreement (N=7). Three respondents mentioned voting for proposed ideas, two did not respond, and ten said they did not participate in community decision-making. Other responses were somewhat vague, including 'I participate,' 'nice,' 'sometimes,' and 'great,' and one mentioned not participating at all due to being underage, reflecting community attitudes toward involving children in decision-making processes.

Children identified various ways of volunteering and participating in charities (N=13) as activities that promote community participation. Only three respondents mentioned sports, while eight stated there are no ways, three said they do not know, and others responded vaguely, mentioning social networks or their age as barriers to participation. When asked whether children would like to be invited to participate in decision-making at the local government level, only five responded affirmatively, with various other responses reflecting uncertainty or disinterest. Responses varied widely in addressing obstacles to participation and reasons for not participating in family, school, or community activities. While a majority stated they are or wish to participate, some expressed concerns about a lack of motivation, self-esteem, or opportunities for meaningful engagement. Others cited a lack of freedom of speech, feeling unheard, or not being selected for positions of influence.

Finally, when asked about changes or advancements they would like to see in children's participation across family, school, and community settings, responses included a desire for being heard more often and opportunities for constructive inclusion and suggestions for greater engagement by counsellors. However, some respondents expressed uncertainty or a lack of desire for change.

„Children are quite disinterested in participating in decision-making that does not directly affect them and whose consequences they will not be able to clearly see. I would like it if more work was done to make children understand the importance of participating in decision-making in the community and to become more interested in it'.

Children were asked about their satisfaction with the level of decision-making, and most of them said that they were satisfied (38.2%), while (25.5%) said that they were very satisfied.

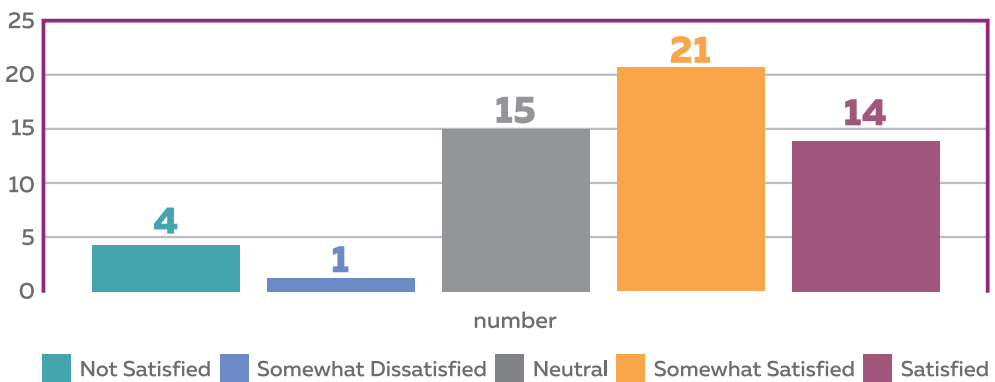


Chart 3. *How satisfied are you with the level of participation?*

Closing in on the conclusion, children were invited to share any additional thoughts regarding their participation in family, school, or community. The majority of children (48) expressed no desire to add further comments, while a few voiced specific desires for increased engagement in school decision-making processes (N=3). Some mentioned a general wish for more participation in school, while one suggested the elimination of the school parliament to ensure broader participation in decision-making processes. Additionally, one respondent gave a vague response, mentioning football.

Subsequently, children were asked to provide examples of good practices in decision-making processes. While two respondents cited student parliaments, others either did not respond or couldn't recall any examples. Some believed everyone should have a voice in decision-making, emphasising the importance of being heard by professors and students. Another respondent highlighted the necessity of establishing trust, understanding, and mutual respect among individuals, including children. Several children shared personal experiences where they felt empowered to voice their opinions, mentioning the importance

of carefully considering when and how to communicate their views. One child recounted their grandmother's practice of always consulting and considering their wishes, illustrating a positive example of inclusion and respect within the family dynamic.

6.2 Discussion of Findings

The findings suggest that young people understand participation and are familiar with fundamental rights, particularly within the family and school contexts. However, there appears to be uncertainty or hesitation regarding participation within the community. Some young individuals even expressed a lack of belonging to communities or cited age-related barriers as reasons for non-participation.

Interestingly, while young people may articulate various options for participation, the actual engagement seems to diminish when asked to specify how and where they participate. This trend extends even to participation within the family, with a small subset of children indicating non-participation altogether. Moreover, there's a notable level of distrust towards student Parliaments, possibly stemming from perceived flaws in the electoral process.

When prompted to provide examples of successful inclusion, many respondents struggled to articulate concrete instances, suggesting either a lack of personal experience or a failure to recognise instances of participation. This observation raises questions about the extent of young people's exposure to decision-making processes facilitated by adults.

Furthermore, many young individuals were reluctant to participate in decision-making processes led by state bodies. While some expressed scepticism or a lack of perceived significance, others may harbour distrust towards state institutions' consistency in including youth in decision-making.

Despite these challenges, there's a recognition among young people that participation in community activities fosters social responsibility and can potentially empower them to take on more active roles within society. However, the findings indicate that only about half of young individuals actively engage in socially responsible work, highlighting the need for further encouragement and support.

In summary, while there is a foundational understanding of participation among young people, there are evident barriers and uncertainties surrounding their involvement, particularly within the broader community and decision-making processes led by state institutions. Efforts to enhance youth participation should focus on addressing these barriers, fostering trust, and providing meaningful opportunities for engagement to empower young individuals as active contributors to society.

6.3 Focus Groups with Children

They all say it is in our best interest, but let's see what is in our interest and what is just on paper. MD

We have conducted two focus groups (FG) aimed at children aged 17 to gain a comprehensive understanding of the possibilities and limitations surrounding child rights and children's participation in Serbia. A total of 8 youths participated in these sessions, of which four were female and four were male.

During these discussions, children expressed varying levels of familiarity with child rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While it was evident that the topic is widely discussed, there was a consensus among participants that there is significant room for improvement in terms of respecting and upholding child rights in their community.

One particularly insightful observation made by the children was their perception of child rights as entitlements without corresponding obligations. They articulated a belief that child rights exist primarily to facilitate their optimal development without necessarily recognising the reciprocal responsibilities that come with these rights. That highlights a potential gap in understanding between the conceptualisation of child rights and their practical application in everyday life.

These focus groups provided valuable insights into children's perspectives regarding their rights and participation in Serbia. Moving forward, it is essential to address the identified areas for improvement and to foster a deeper understanding among children about the holistic nature of their rights and responsibilities within the framework of child rights conventions.

MR: 'You can not remove rights from the child if he or she misbehaves. No one should, for example, work at 12 years old to be able to have food and beverages...'

Participants in the focus groups also observed that within the school environment, the discourse around child rights tends to centre more on compliance with laws and regulations rather than a genuine focus on children's rights. They noted that educators often frame discussions about child rights by emphasising children's corresponding obligations, potentially overshadowing the inherent rights aspect. That highlights a crucial distinction between acknowledging rights as legal entitlements and understanding them as fundamental principles guiding interactions and relationships within educational settings.

Furthermore, despite the widespread dissemination of information about child rights, children themselves are not frequently invited to actively participate in decisions or

discussions concerning matters that affect them. This observation underscores the importance of informing children about their rights and actively involving them in processes that directly impact their lives, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment.

Participants emphasised the significance of respecting child rights within the school environment and educational practices, recognising it as foundational for nurturing a culture of dignity, equality, and inclusion. They believed that prioritising child rights in education creates opportunities for enhancing children's overall quality of life, promoting their holistic development and well-being.

The insights essentially gleaned from these discussions underscore the need for a paradigm shift in how child rights are perceived and enacted within educational contexts, moving beyond mere legal compliance towards genuine recognition, empowerment, and meaningful participation of children in shaping their learning experiences and environments.

SA: 'Maybe those rights depend on those opportunities for life. How much quality of life will the child have if the child has or does not have these rights? If a child does not have the right to education, then he will be limited in some opportunities for a better life.'

Children further acknowledged that timely provision of rights is essential in shaping their capacity to engage in decision-making processes as adults. They recognised that cultivating a rights-respecting environment during their formative years is foundational for nurturing the skills, attitudes, and sense of agency necessary for meaningful participation in societal affairs later in life. Conversely, they expressed concerns that the failure to support and exercise their rights could perpetuate an environment wherein access to rights as adults may be hindered or altogether denied.

This insight emphasises the interconnectedness between the realisation of child rights during childhood and the broader implications for their lifelong development and well-being. It emphasises the imperative of recognising children's rights as intrinsic to their dignity and agency and actively working to ensure their effective implementation and realisation within all spheres of life. By doing so, we not only honour children's rights in the present but also lay the groundwork for a more equitable, just, and rights-respecting society for generations to come.

MR: 'When we are small and young, we think in our head what is actually forbidden to us...if we are denied some rights, then our whole life something is forbidden in our head, which we keep. And we can't somehow get rid of it.'

When it comes to addressing violations of child rights, we've gathered a multitude of perspectives and reflections from children. If confronted with a severe violation, many

believe it should be reported to the police. Yet, they prefer their parents to initiate the process on their behalf, thinking it would carry greater weight and effectiveness. Children tended to seek information about avenues for protecting their rights from institutions such as the Office of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality or the Ombudsman rather than relying on their school environment. They perceive schools as potentially punitive environments, where raising concerns may result in repercussions from school authorities, hindering their willingness to speak out.

Moreover, children voiced frustrations with the perceived inefficiency and bureaucratic nature of existing procedures for addressing rights violations. They view problem-solving within the school setting as superficial and temporary, lacking a genuine commitment to addressing underlying issues. Whether it's teachers, principals, or psychologists involved, children feel that solutions are often short-term and fail to enact meaningful change, leading to recurrent problems.

OS: 'Although it is somewhat related, the school would not even be in the 50th place on that list.'

Participants emphasised the need for substantive, tangible responses from schools when rights violations occur. They expressed a desire for more than just lip service or declarative statements; instead, they seek proactive measures that genuinely address underlying issues and prioritise the well-being and rights of children. Children indicate that a more supportive and responsive school environment—one that actively listens to their concerns and implements effective solutions—is crucial in empowering them to assert their rights confidently and effectively

OS: 'The most important thing is to do something about it. I think that being included is one thing, but another thing is when you actually see some effect from what was declared somewhere.'

Children universally felt most secure in expressing their voices within the familiar confines of their homes. Conversely, within the school environment, opportunities for genuine dialogue and inclusion of children's perspectives are few and far between. While occasional consultations may occur, most of the time, input from children is either dismissed outright or altered to conform to predetermined school policies and the preferences of adults, typically the principal or school pedagogists.

Despite these challenges, all participants emphasised the importance of acknowledging and respecting their viewpoints, even if their suggestions were not ultimately adopted. They stressed the value of visibility, asserting that their voices should be recognised and considered in decision-making processes within the school.

Remarkably, amidst this landscape of limited participation, the school parliament emerged as a beacon of empowerment and agency for children. Here, children found a rare space where they could express themselves freely, devoid of adult imposition. They described the school parliament as a safe, proactive environment where they felt a sense of ownership and responsibility. In these sessions, children actively engaged in decision-making processes, shaping the direction of their school community in a manner that resonated with their own experiences and aspirations.

The recognition of the school parliament as a liberating and participatory forum underscores the profound impact that meaningful inclusion can have on children's sense of agency and belonging within the school setting. It highlights the importance of fostering spaces where children's voices are not only heard but also valued and acted upon, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and empowering educational environment

IJ: 'I would say that maybe one good thing where we in high school can specifically express our opinion is the school parliament, which is made up exclusively of students, and there we don't have any representatives of the elderly or authority like in class.'

All participants shared instances where they were actively invited to offer suggestions and evaluate teaching methods employed by their professors. Remarkably, they recounted occasions where their input led to tangible changes in how their teachers approached their work. This experience proved profoundly empowering for the children, leaving a lasting impression and instilling a sense of agency and efficacy in participating in future decision-making processes.

The fact that their recommendations were not only considered but also implemented by their professors underscored the significance of their voices and the impact they could have on shaping their educational experiences. It validated their perspectives and contributions, reinforcing their belief in actively engaging in dialogue and sharing their insights.

Moreover, this positive outcome catalysed further involvement in decision-making processes for the children. Encouraged by the tangible results of their participation, they expressed a heightened willingness to contribute to discussions and initiatives to improve their learning environment.

This anecdote highlights the transformative potential of genuine student engagement in educational decision-making. By recognising and valuing children's input, educators not only enhance the quality of teaching and learning but also foster a culture of empowerment and collaboration within the school community. It is a powerful reminder of the importance of creating opportunities for student voice and agency to thrive in educational settings.

AT: 'That's what he said "We're on a mission here to rate you. It might be fair if you rate us too.'"

Among the narratives shared, there were instances of negative experiences where professors reacted defensively or angrily to feedback provided by children regarding certain aspects of their teaching methods. This adverse reaction had a negative effect on the children's willingness to speak up in subsequent interactions, as they internalised a fear of potential reprisal for expressing their thoughts openly. This dynamic perpetuated a culture of silence and apprehension, wherein children felt compelled to withhold their perspectives out of concern for potential punishment or backlash.

These experiences underscore the significant impact educators' responses to student feedback can have on shaping the learning environment. When children perceive that their input is met with hostility or dismissal, it erodes trust and stifles their willingness to engage in constructive dialogue. Instead of feeling empowered to voice their concerns and contribute to improvements, they retreat into silence, reluctant to risk further confrontation or censure.

This highlights the critical importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment where children feel safe and encouraged to express their opinions without fear of negative consequences. Educators play a pivotal role in fostering open communication and cultivating a culture of mutual respect and trust. By acknowledging and valuing student feedback, educators enhance their effectiveness and empower children to actively participate in shaping their educational experiences.

OS: 'I think that one of the worst things that actually often happens, especially in the educational system, is when a child-student expresses his opinion, whether it is a teacher, the institution itself, which certainly requires some courage and then immediately met not with some counterargument or with some answer, let alone with some positive change based on that opinion, but with retaliation from the institution itself, from the school itself. This happened to us at our school, where some criticism is presented to the professors, and the professors immediately turn it away or try to attack the student. It's not like I'm teaching badly, but you're not learning anything... or in general, just expressing your opinion presents some problem.'

Children also highlighted a pervasive belief among some of their professors that they were not mature or educated enough to have valid opinions on education and their needs. They expressed frustration at being dismissed as immature or childish when attempting to engage in discussions about important aspects of their educational development and opportunities. This perception of their voices as inconsequential left them feeling disempowered and marginalised as if their perspectives were deemed irrelevant in decisions that directly impacted their lives.

This sentiment reflects a broader challenge within educational settings, where there can be a tendency to undervalue the insights and contributions of students. When children are relegated to the sidelines and denied a meaningful role in decision-making processes, it undermines their sense of agency and perpetuates a cycle of disengagement and apathy.

MR: 'It's as if, on the one hand, we are humiliated by being students. We don't have the right to say, "It bothers us" at all.'

OS: 'It is immediately assumed that we are the starting point of something bad that happened. It is immediately automatically assumed that we are more likely to lie than the teaching staff or the professor.'

Participants also highlighted the increased opportunities within the education system to engage in various courses and sports that cater to their interests and preferences. This expansion of options has provided them with a broader range of avenues for personal development compared to previous years.

Moreover, many of the participants in our focus groups were actively involved with or had collaborations with various organizations such as UNICEF, Friends of Children Serbia, and the Red Cross. These organizations have been instrumental in promoting children's participation and providing meaningful platforms for engagement. The workshops organised by these organizations, often held in Belgrade, facilitated valuable connections among participants. They seized these opportunities to network and exchange experiences, fostering a sense of community and solidarity among children.

Additionally, participants emphasised the significance of social networks as a valuable channel for promoting child rights and facilitating communication. Through platforms like social media, they were able to share insights, information, and experiences, amplifying their voices and advocating for their rights in a broader context.

Furthermore, participants recalled instances where professors in school played a role in disseminating important information. While perhaps less frequent than other channels, these interactions underscored the potential for educators to contribute to promoting child rights within the school environment.

Overall, these diverse engagement channels have enriched children's experiences, empowering them to participate actively in discussions, advocate for their rights, and contribute to positive change within their communities and beyond.

AT: 'Mainly with those social networks and with friends and school. At least in our case, they are hired for it, and I think that school should be one of the main ways to inform children about it because we literally spend 90% of our time there.'

All participants were also asked about obstacles in reaching their right to participate. One of the most commonly mentioned obstacles was information about possibilities and rights, and they think that the organization of the country is the reason for inadequate information sharing, so even when they have some piece of information, there is always something missing, which makes it a complication for children to make decisions on their own. Children saw obstacles in the country's political solutions, as they perceived the high level of corruption and a low level of youth representation in decision-making positions. All participants agreed that you need to be connected to governmental or political parties to occupy a position and have your views respected in Serbia. They also believed that if the youth were in a decision-making position, they were always abused for political purposes.

MD: 'Perhaps the fact that there is, unfortunately, a lot of corruption within our country, I have to say it in this way. In general, there are quite a few people in the Parliament and in the assembly who are a little older than us, and there is nothing new, nothing fresh.'

IJ: 'I specifically know that there are Youth Offices in every municipality where there are some projects that the office organises, but nowhere is there a specific promotion that we can be involved in it, that we can apply at all unless we ourselves do not apply at all. We inform you that we cannot get that information. Again, when we get that information, we don't know at all how to apply, how to participate in it, how to contribute to the development of perhaps an idea or if we may have an idea how we can develop it with the help of that office or any municipality, organizations... So even though it exists, none of us are specifically trained for it like young people in Serbia.'

Children predominantly gather information through social networks, relying on interactions with friends and online browsing. While professors at school are seen as potential sources of information, children generally only turn to them if they actively seek out information themselves. The consensus among most children is that the onus is on them to seek out knowledge and resources.

This acknowledgement underscores the self-reliant nature of children in navigating their informational landscape. They recognise the importance of proactively engaging with various sources to stay informed and empowered. While educators play a role as potential facilitators of information, children understand that the responsibility to seek out knowledge, ultimately, lies with them.

In essence, this reflects a culture of self-directed learning and personal agency among children, wherein they take ownership of their educational journey and actively pursue opportunities for growth and development.

MR: 'In the year when I found out about Petnica, no one at school mentioned it, and only when it was time to apply did all the professors say that their course existed in Petnica and that maybe someone should apply and suggested some who would be great to are going, and a year before that it was not happening at all. I mean, the first time it happened to me was in high school that I heard about it.'

Children recognise various avenues for expressing their views, including through NGOs, international organizations, and State institutions such as the Commissioner for Equality and the Ombudsman. Recently, the effectiveness of the school parliament has become evident, as a suggestion made within it—regarding an increase in the duration of student breaks—was not only introduced but also acknowledged by the school principal and other authorities.

Volunteering within various organizations is viewed as an opportunity to become more active and cultivate the skills necessary to express one's voice more assertively. Additionally, children perceive questions from schools as valuable opportunities to enhance their perspectives, providing regular platforms for expression and engagement.

These diverse avenues of expression reflect a growing recognition of the importance of active participation and advocacy among children and youth. By leveraging these opportunities, they are amplifying their voices and contributing to positive changes within their communities and institutions.

AT: 'I think that maybe there could be some surveys more often, that different target groups are surveyed, that they ask about their wishes, and I think that schools are probably the most favourable place for that.'

Participants offered recommendations for maximising impact, suggesting disseminating information about children's rights in child-friendly formats throughout schools, social networks, and other spaces frequented by children. Additionally, they emphasised the importance of cultural centres within communities as vital platforms for sharing information about child rights and providing opportunities for action when these rights are violated.

MD: 'In particular, the cultural centre of my municipality has various workshops and a painting school. We may have portrayed the school as a place of despair, but we have a parliament, we have sessions, we really try, the pedagogue is very involved, we work a lot on the story against violence, sometimes we even look at mental health... within all our schools at least someone thought of it, but generally some of our engagements in private life or extracurricular activities are the most important to us.'

All children expressed a profound sense of honour and appreciation for being allowed to express their views, recognising that such opportunities are often rare. They perceive this

as more than just a chance to voice their opinions; it's an invitation to take responsibility and become actively engaged in shaping their education and the broader environments that significantly impact their lives. This inclusive approach fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment, encouraging children to play an active role in their learning journey and beyond.

IJ: 'I would say honoured, but also, in a way, you feel important as someone who leads the group. For the reason that someone wants to be interested in finding out more about something, about some rights or that he has a question but he does not have the possibility to express or whether to ask if there is a possibility to solve that problem, he then turns to me, and that is a very important thing because then I not only maybe solve my own questions, some problems that I see, but also solve the problems of others.'

Participants also emphasised the importance of incorporating more discussions into various subjects, fostering an environment where their voices can be heard and their viewpoints valued. They believe that sustained engagement in such discussions over time can lead to a greater sense of empowerment and inclusion in decision-making processes. Educators can provide children with invaluable opportunities to refine their critical thinking skills, articulate their perspectives, and contribute meaningfully to shaping their educational experiences and beyond by actively encouraging dialogue and debate. In essence, fostering a culture of open communication and active participation enriches the learning environment. It empowers children to become agents of positive change in their communities and society as a whole.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Child rights in Serbia are governed by extensive laws and mechanisms designed to promote the inclusion and participation of young people. However, there is a notable gap regarding policies specifically addressing young children's rights. This omission poses a potential legal challenge, especially considering the importance of empowering children to participate from an early age.

Participation is a dynamic process that gains meaning and value when children's viewpoints are promoted and considered from early stages. Early participation can significantly enhance the overall participative functioning of young individuals, fostering a sense of agency and belonging.

While efforts to realise children's rights exist across various sectors, there are significant gaps in ensuring equal inclusion of all children in the decision-making bodies of organizations dedicated to promoting child rights. This limitation hinders the comprehensive realisation of children's rights and potentially marginalises certain groups of children from the benefits of these initiatives.

Institutional mechanisms, such as the Council on the Rights of the Child, have been established with comprehensive activities promoting child rights. However, these mechanisms often lack continuity due to challenges in cooperation with the government responsible for scheduling and holding sessions. This inconsistency limits the effectiveness and impact of these institutional initiatives.

Furthermore, civil societies in Serbia appear to focus extensively on the obstacles in realising child rights. Beyond the limited functionality of existing mechanisms, there is a notable emphasis on the lack of awareness among adults within the educational system. These adults play a crucial role as key actors in establishing and promoting child rights through educational processes. Their awareness and engagement are pivotal in creating an environment that fosters respect for and realisation of children's rights.

Young people yearn for validation and respect, seeking an environment where their ideas are heard and considered, even if not all of their desires are met. They value the concept of joint decision-making and compromise, understanding that collaboration can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. However, they express a lack of trust in the teaching staff at school and the support services available, citing a perceived lack of tangible results or meaningful impact from their efforts. This scepticism extends to the belief that expressing their concerns will yield no real change, leading many young people to feel discouraged and disheartened.

In addition to the lack of trust in adults, young people had a prevailing sense that their perspectives were undervalued because of their perceived lack of experience or maturity. Despite potential interest in participation, many are uninformed about how to get involved and unaware of its benefits. Moreover, they express a desire for simplicity and clarity in communication, emphasising the need for information to be presented in a language and format that they can easily understand and relate to. While they primarily rely on social networks, friends, and media for information, schools are often seen as the least effective channel for communication and engagement.

Although some positive examples of teacher practice involve children, such instances are overshadowed by the perception that many adults only engage in pro forma actions, prioritising appearance over substance. Yet, peer education emerges as a potential avenue for motivating young people to become more involved in various activities, offering a relatable and impactful approach to engagement.

Despite these challenges, young people demonstrate remarkable creativity and insight, particularly in suggesting ways to foster a culture of dialogue and expression of diverse opinions within the school environment. Their ideas underscore the importance of creating spaces where their voices are not only heard but also valued and respected, laying the foundation for meaningful participation and empowerment.

In conclusion, while Serbia has made strides in establishing legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms for child rights, significant challenges remain in ensuring the comprehensive realisation and equal inclusion of all children. Addressing these gaps requires a concerted effort involving government bodies, civil societies, and educational institutions to foster a more inclusive and rights-respecting environment for all children in Serbia. It is imperative to prioritise the voices and perspectives of young people and work towards creating spaces where their participation is not only welcomed but also valued and respected.

Enhancing children's participation in decision-making processes is crucial for creating inclusive societies where their voices are heard and valued. In Serbia, while there have been strides in recognising children's rights, there remains a need for concrete actions to promote their active engagement across various sectors. The following recommendations aim to guide policymakers, educators, community leaders and various government and civil society stakeholders in fostering a more participatory environment for children and young people. These recommendations encompass policy development, legislative frameworks, educational initiatives, community investment, and awareness-raising efforts to ensure equal and meaningful participation of all children, including those from vulnerable groups. Implementing these measures can pave the way for a more inclusive and child-friendly Serbia, where children's rights and perspectives are central to decision-making processes.

- 1** Policy Development: Recognising and valuing children's perspectives in planning and decision-making processes is fundamental to creating inclusive and child-centred policies. Adopting policies that prioritise children's voices ensures that their unique insights, experiences, and needs are considered in shaping the future of our communities and societies. It is essential to ensure that policies reflect the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This includes the right to participation, where children have the right to express their views and have them considered in matters affecting them.
- 2** Feedback mechanisms: Implementing effective feedback mechanisms ensures that policies and programs resonate with children's needs, aspirations, and lived experiences. A well-designed feedback system facilitates an ongoing dialogue between policymakers, service providers, and children, fostering a collaborative approach to policy development and implementation. It is necessary to create accessible and child-friendly platforms where children can easily share their feedback. This could include online surveys, suggestion boxes in schools and community centres, interactive workshops, and dedicated helplines, promoting safety through anonymity and confidentiality to ensure that children feel safe and comfortable providing feedback by offering options for anonymous submissions and maintaining confidentiality. This encourages honest and open communication, allowing children to express their views without fear of repercussions. To reach various children across the country, it is important to utilise multiple engagement methods to cater to different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and communication preferences. This could involve arts-based activities, storytelling sessions, digital platforms, and group discussions tailored to children's developmental stages and interests. Also, communicating the outcomes of the feedback process to children, acknowledging their contributions, and explaining how their input has influenced decision-making are essential parts of child participation. This transparency builds trust and reinforces the importance of children's participation in shaping policies and programs.
- 3** Developing and implementing a robust legislative framework is essential to institutionalise the participation of children and young people across various sectors. A comprehensive legislative framework provides a clear and structured pathway for integrating children's perspectives into decision-making processes, ensuring their rights are upheld and respected. Key components of a solid legislative framework include legal recognition of child rights, clear guidelines and standards, inclusive policy development, capacity building, monitoring, and accountability.

- 4** Creating an inclusive and participatory school environment is crucial for empowering students and promoting democratic values from a young age. Training sessions are central to equipping children and teaching staff with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to foster a culture of participation and inclusive decision-making within schools. Components of the training session should include understanding participation and inclusive decision-making, clarity about roles and responsibilities, practical tools and strategies and creating inclusive spaces.
- 5** Develop and disseminate child-friendly materials on child rights tailored to different age groups and comprehension levels. These materials should employ engaging formats, simplified language, and culturally relevant content to convey key concepts related to children's rights effectively. Collaborate with schools, community centres, and local organizations to raise awareness of children's rights and promote a culture of respect and accountability. Organising workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns to engage stakeholders and foster dialogue on issues related to child rights.
- 6** Investing in dedicated spaces for children and young people within local communities is essential for fostering their holistic development, promoting social inclusion, and providing them with safe and supportive environments to learn, grow, and engage with peers. Community investment in such spaces demonstrates a commitment to prioritising children's well-being, empowerment, and active participation in community life. The benefits of Community Investment in Dedicated Spaces are a safe and supportive environment, holistic development, empowerment and engagement, social cohesion and community building
- 7** Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness and impact of initiatives promoting child rights awareness. Regularly solicit feedback from children, caregivers, and stakeholders to identify areas for improvement and refine strategies accordingly. Adopting a comprehensive approach that integrates education, advocacy, and support systems can empower children to understand, assert, and protect their rights.
- 8** Inclusive representation is fundamental for ensuring that children's and young people's voices are heard, valued, and integrated into decision-making processes at the local level. Communities can foster a culture of inclusivity, diversity, and active citizenship by actively involving them in local bodies and diverse youth policy mechanisms. Inclusive representation comprises youth representation in local bodies, diverse youth policy mechanisms, equal inclusion and a focus on vulnerable groups.

- 9** Continuous training for adults working with children is essential to deepen their understanding, skills, and practices for promoting and facilitating children's participation. By investing in ongoing professional development, professionals across various sectors can create supportive environments prioritising children's voices, rights, and agency.
- 10** Creating dedicated platforms for children to express their concerns, share their experiences, and contribute ideas on various issues affecting them is essential for fostering their participation, empowerment, and agency. These platforms serve as vital channels for amplifying children's voices, influencing decision-making, and driving positive change.
- 11** Information dissemination is critical in empowering children and young people by equipping them with the knowledge, understanding, and resources to recognise and assert their rights, opportunities, and responsibilities. Providing accessible and responsible online content is essential in fostering informed decision-making, promoting active participation, and ensuring the well-being and safety of children and young people in the digital age.
- 12** Mechanism promotion is crucial for advocating and activating robust participation mechanisms that enable children to engage actively, meaningfully, and effectively in decision-making processes, programs, and initiatives that affect their lives. By advocating for enhancing and expanding participation mechanisms, communities can foster a culture of inclusivity, empowerment, and collaboration, amplifying children's voices and contributions.

In conclusion, promoting child participation in Serbia requires a multifaceted approach that includes legislative reforms, educational initiatives, and community engagement. Ensuring that children have a voice in matters affecting their lives is crucial for their development and empowerment. One way of achieving this is by integrating child participation principles into national policies, creating child-friendly spaces to express their views freely, and training adults to support and respect children's opinions. Additionally, schools should incorporate participatory practices into their curricula, encouraging children to engage in decision-making processes actively. By fostering an inclusive environment that values and listens to children, Serbia can make significant strides in upholding children's rights and building a more democratic society.

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