

Latvia: Youth Participation in Municipalities

Youth delegate to the Congress from Latvia, Andžela Rudzīte. 2022

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to **study the existing youth work policies in Latvian municipalities to learn how the municipalities encourage youth participation**. This paper will be based on The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (Hereafter: the Charter) and the Youth Law, passed in the Latvian Parliament in 2008. Each of the 43 municipalities will be contacted and asked questions that will help determine whether the municipalities take into consideration the Charter and the Youth Law, and what measures are taken to improve youth participation in each municipality.

The obtained data will be forwarded to the Latvian national delegation to the Congress.

This paper consists of three parts. The first part is the introduction, which lays out the structure of the paper, the aims, and how these aims will be achieved. It also briefly explores the Charter and the Youth Law, a law adopted by the Latvian Parliament concerning how municipalities should organize youth work. The second part examines the answers obtained from the municipalities, and the third part provides conclusions.

The paper contains concepts that need to be explained. **The Charter**¹ defines youth participation, stating it is “(...) about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.”² The Charter provides ideas and instruments that can be used by municipalities and “institutions involved in participation work.”³ Within the framework of this paper, municipalities will be asked, whether they take into account the instruments provided by the Charter when planning youth work.

Currently the Latvian legislation regulates how municipalities should organize their youth work with the **Youth Law** passed in 2008 (Jaunatnes likums⁴). The aim of this legislation is to “improve the quality of life of the young people (13-25 y.o.) by encouraging their initiatives, work ethic, patriotism, participation in decision making and social life, as well as by supporting youth work.”⁵ The legislation delegates youth work responsibilities to different national institutions. The municipalities are accountable for providing an “institutional system for youth work.”⁶ To accomplish that, the

¹ Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, 2003. *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*. <https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-1510/Revised%20European%20Charter%20on%20the%20Participation%20of%20YP.pdf>

² Council of Europe, 2003. *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/revised-european-charter-on-the-participation-of-young-people-in-local-and-regional-life>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Saeima. Jaunatnes likums, pieņemts 2008. gada 8. maijā. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/175920-jaunatnes-likums>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

municipalities have a right to designate an institution responsible for youth work; employ a youth affairs specialist who coordinates youth work; establish a youth work consultative commission; establish a youth center; establish a youth council. The Youth Law determines that municipalities have to provide the opportunity for youth groups and organizations to participate in the decision-making process for decisions that affect the youth, by letting the youth organizations and youth groups join the discussion before the decision is adopted.⁷ However, in May 2022, the Latvian Parliament agreed in the first reading to make amendments to the Youth law, turning the before-mentioned rights municipalities have into obligations, meaning each municipality will *have to* establish a youth center, council, consultative commission, employ a youth affairs specialist, etc. In addition, if passed, the amended Youth law will consider young people ages 15-30 “the youth”.

To obtain data, overall, 43 municipalities will be contacted and asked the following questions:

1. Does your municipality have a designated youth affairs specialist?
2. Does your municipality have a youth council, a youth center, or a consultative youth work commission in place?
3. Is your municipality planning for the amendments in the Youth law which have been supported by the Parliament in the first reading? How will these amendments impact youth work in your municipality?
4. The Latvian Youth law states that each municipality should provide a platform for youth organizations and groups to participate in the decision-making process by giving opportunities to these groups to discuss the rulings that concern the youth before they are passed. How does your municipality provide for this requirement?
5. Does your municipality consider the youth participation instruments of The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life when planning youth work?
6. One of the instruments of the Charter dictates that it is of utmost importance to inform young people about opportunities that concern them. What structures does your municipality have in place to promote information dissemination to young people?
7. Another instrument of the Charter states that municipalities should promote youth organizations, and have a “specific budget designated solely for supporting youth organizations (..)” What structures does your municipality have in place to promote youth organizations?
8. What are some of the successful youth participation stories in your municipality? What are your best competencies as a municipality that encourage youth participation that you could share with other municipalities?
9. What do you think could be changed in your municipality, to improve youth participation?

⁷ Saecima. Jaunatnes likums, pieņemts 2008. gada 8. maijā. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/175920-jaunatnes-likums>

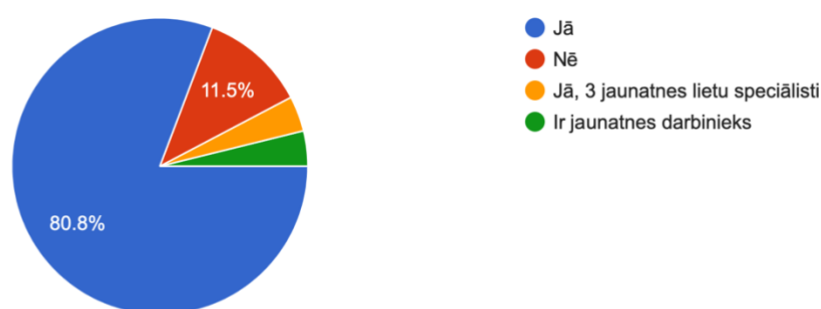
2. THE RESULTS

Out of 43 municipalities the survey was sent to, responses were provided only from 26 municipalities, and some of the youth workers provided responses only after repeated requests to do so. Notably, none of the youth workers from Rīga, where a significant number of Latvian youth live, responded. This leads to the unfortunate limitation of this paper: more than half of Latvian youth will not be represented in this paper, due to the lack of responses from their municipality youth workers.

1. Does your municipality have a designated youth affairs specialist?

1. Vai Jūsu pašvaldībā ir iecelts jaunatnes lietu speciālists, kas plāno, veic un koordinē darbu ar jaunatni?

26 responses

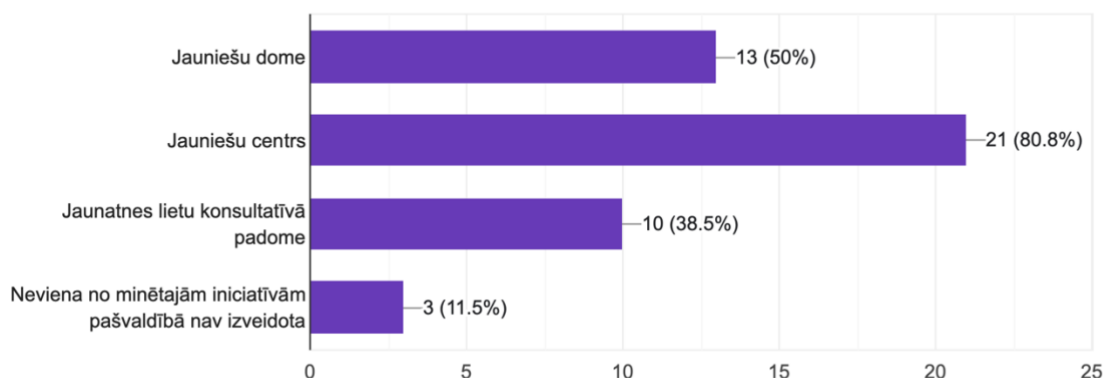


21 of the responders pointed out that their municipality has a youth affairs specialist, one of the municipalities even claimed they had 3 youth affairs specialists in place. However, 4 municipalities admitted not having a youth affairs specialist, one of them indicating their municipality only had a youth worker. The main difference between these two terms - a youth affairs specialist plans and coordinates youth work in a municipality, whereas a youth worker can be a person employed at a youth center or a different establishment working with youth. This means that 4 of 26 municipalities have not prioritized coordinating and planning for youth affairs in the community.

2. Does your municipality have a youth council, a youth center, or a consultative youth work commission in place?

2. Vai Jūsu pašvaldībā ir izveidota jauniešu dome, jauniešu centrs vai jaunatnes lietu konsultatīvā padome?

26 responses



13 or 50% of the responders pointed out their municipality had a youth council, and 80.8% of the municipalities had a youth center in place. Only 10 municipalities had a consultative youth work commission in place. 3 of the municipalities have not established any of the before mentioned structures to encourage youth participation.

3. Is your municipality planning for the amendments in the Youth law which have been supported by the Parliament in the first reading? How will these amendments impact youth work in your municipality?

16 of the respondents indicated that their municipality had specific plans in place to prepare for the upcoming changes in the Youth law. This included 6 municipalities that still had to adjust after the administrative-territorial reform was completed, decreasing the number of municipalities, and, therefore, giving more responsibility to each respective municipality and 3 municipalities that pointed out they will have to adjust to the new age limit for young people considered “the youth”. 5 of the municipalities indicated they were ready for the upcoming changes in the law because all or most of the necessary structures had already been created. Another 3 municipalities said they were planning for the upcoming changes, or will start planning only after the amendments are passed. 2 of the municipalities had no plans to prepare for the upcoming changes.

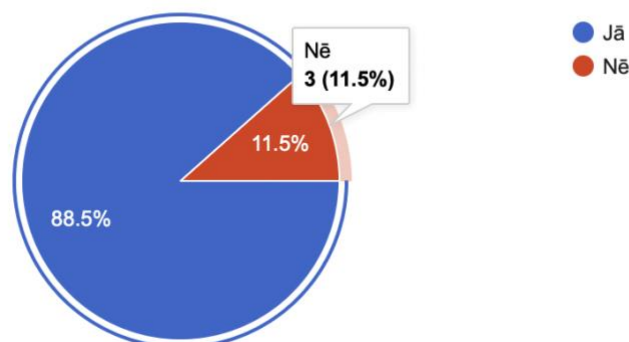
4. The Latvian Youth law states that each municipality should provide a platform for youth organizations and groups to participate in the decision-making process by giving opportunities to these groups to discuss the rulings that concern the youth before they are passed. How does your municipality provide for this requirement?

21 of the 26 respondents pointed out that their municipality had established one or multiple initiatives for youth organizations, youth groups, and the youth themselves to discuss the topical questions concerning the youth. Most of these municipalities reported actively using the already established youth councils and consultative youth work commissions, which included young people in the decision-making process. Many municipalities reported also regularly organizing events for the youth to participate in and talk to the council representatives. The respondents pointed out multiple ways their municipality was including the youth in the decision. One municipality reported having given a chance for the youth to participate in a very practical way – when renovating the school, the youth were allowed to plan the design of the library, the “quiet spot” and even the color of the paint. Another municipality indicated that the youth had access to the mayor directly and had been encouraged to reach out to the mayor personally. Multiple municipalities had organized events called “coffee with politicians,” where the youth had an opportunity to discuss important questions with the decision-makers. One municipality indicated they were not able to evaluate this question because they didn’t have any local NGOs. 4 of the municipalities indicated not having any platform in place where youth organizations and groups could participate in the decision-making process. It can be concluded that the municipalities that have successfully established youth councils and/or youth work consultative commissions, had the best cooperation with the youth in the decision-making process.

5. Does your municipality consider the youth participation instruments of The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life when planning youth work?

5. Vai Jūsu pašvaldība, plānojot jaunatnes darbu, ņem vērā Pārskatīto Eiropas hartu par jauniešu līdzdalību vietējā un reģionālajā dzīvē, ko 2003. gadā pieņēma Eiropas Padomes Kongress?

26 responses



23 of the respondents or 88,5% indicated their municipality was considering the instruments of the Charter when planning youth work, but three of the Municipalities weren't. The respondents pointing out their municipality was not considering these instruments might mean that there has not been any information provided for the youth workers about the Charter. This means that the Latvian Association of the Local and Regional Governments (Latvijas Pašvaldību Savienība), which represents the municipalities in the Congress must do more to encourage municipalities to include consider the Charter when planning youth work.

6. One of the instruments of the Charter dictates that it is of utmost importance to inform young people about opportunities that concern them. What structures does your municipality have in place to promote information dissemination to young people?

Most of the respondents pointed out that their municipality had multiple channels for communicating with the youth, only one respondent refused to mention any ways of communicating with the youth, instead responding the communication plan was still being developed. The municipalities most often responded using social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, for communication. A surprising number of the municipalities (10) use WhatsApp groups that include the youth and youth leaders to forward information. Many pointed out that the connection with local education establishments were important information dissemination channels. Municipalities also used the website of the municipality, printed posters, the established youth councils, and even personal text messages and invitations to spread information.

7. Another instrument of the Charter states that municipalities should promote youth organizations, and have a “specific budget designated solely for supporting youth organizations (..)” What structures does your municipality have in place to promote youth organizations?

Only six respondents indicated their municipality had a specific budget for helping youth organizations, one of them specified the annual amount of money their municipality had planned for NGOs, including youth organizations – €700. 11 municipalities provided opportunities for youth organizations to participate in financial grant projects, to help finance their initiatives. 2 municipalities helped youth organizations by providing rooms and equipment for their needs. 2 municipalities helped finance youth organizations and their projects. 2 respondents indicated their municipality did not have such organizations, but if there ever was a need, financial help would be granted. Another 2 respondents reported their municipality did not have specific funding, but resources would be made available if there was ever a request for funding. According to the respondents, 3 of the municipalities didn't have specific funding for youth organizations yet but were planning to include funding from their budget for this specific issue soon. These answers lead to the conclusion that most municipalities don't have a specific budget for youth organizations, but many offer the chance for organizations to participate in financial

grant projects. The one municipality that pointed out the annual budget for NGO funding, proved the funding situation dreary – €700. But it is possible that some municipalities simply don't receive enough funding requests from youth organizations to face the funding situation seriously. It can also be noted that most of the municipalities are open for cooperation and provide funding opportunities, but mostly through project and initiative grants, as well as practical help with rooms and equipment for youth events.

8. What are some of the successful youth participation stories in your municipality? What are your best competencies as a municipality that encourage youth participation that you could share with other municipalities?

Respondents had many valuable successful stories to share. 5 pointed out that volunteer work was very important. Similarly, the respondents emphasized how important it was to be welcoming to the youth initiatives and to give responsibility to the young people. One municipality even reported rewarding participation financially to the young people who work in the youth center. One municipality had asked for help from the youth to help establish a youth center, whereas another municipality reported having active youth who took the creation of a youth center into their own hands. 3 municipalities reported that the project initiative contests were their success stories. Another respondent reported that their municipality had organized a network for 20 schools in the municipality to provide an opportunity for the young people to meet decision-makers, yet another municipality is planning for a network similar to this. One municipality reported having included youth policy in the city development plan for the next 5 years and providing substantial funding for youth participation; another respondent pointed out that the municipality makes ways for the youth to participate in more practical ways, such as painting a mural advising people to be more considerate about the climate change. 2 municipalities pointed out they did not have enough experience to share, another reported still searching for the best methods and learning from other municipalities. It can be concluded that municipalities that encourage the youth to take matters into their own hands and support the youth, can notice that the youth benefit the whole society, for example by volunteering or even helping the Ukrainian refugees, as one municipality pointed out.

9. What do you think should be changed in your municipality, to improve youth participation?

Again, the answers varied, but most often, the respondents pointed out there weren't enough youth workers/youth work specialists in the municipality, in total 6. Out of these, two respondents said there need to be more youth workers to reach the youth in the rural area, another one mentioned that there is a need to provide these youth workers with cars for easier transportation to the rural areas. One respondent indicated there was no youth work specialist in the municipality at all. Infrastructure and practical needs were important factors that the respondents mentioned; one respondent pointed out there

is a need for transportation to be provided for the youth that lives in rural areas, and more rooms would be of use, to be used for youth work. Altogether, 5 municipalities reported the infrastructure for youth work had to be improved. Another important factor the respondents pointed out – there needs to be more cooperation between the youth and the decision-makers, and the decision-makers should be made aware of the importance of youth work. 4 municipalities mentioned it was crucial to plan for youth work strategy so that it's coordinated. Education for youth workers and not enough funding were also mentioned. 3 of the municipalities reported that during the COVID-19 crisis, there was low activity in the youth work field, and these municipalities were still working to recover and improve participation. One respondent emphasized that youth work should be separated from sports, culture, and education and that there had to be a decent amount of youth workers/specialists in each municipality, according to the number of young people in the municipality. 2 of the respondents pointed out that, after the administrative regional reform, new territories were added to the municipality, and that it was important to integrate the youth living in these territories, in the youth work. The problems municipalities had to handle most often: lack of youth workers, too little interaction with decision-makers and youth, lack of infrastructure, integration, and youth workers for rural areas and newly added territories after the administrative-territorial reforms, lack of infrastructure such as cars and rooms, lack of youth work strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

The responses from 26 Latvian municipalities showed some positive developments in youth work, but also pointed to some grave problems in youth work policies in municipalities.

It could be observed from the responses that municipalities and youth workers are open to the youth and their ideas, providing many opportunities, events, and possibilities for organizations to receive funding by participating in initiative funding contests. The municipalities provided many positive examples of youth work, and the respondents emphasized the need to trust young people and empower them to realize their ideas. It is also commendable that in their responses, respondents indicated that they had been planning for changes in the youth law, and the vast majority (88.5%) pointed out their municipality considered the Charter when planning their youth work. It is also good practice, that more than a few of the municipalities reported providing opportunities for the young people to meet decision-makers so that concerns can be shared directly with the people leading the municipalities.

However, the responses proved multiple problems that need to be resolved.

First, municipalities are struggling to adjust to the administrative-territorial reform which was completed in 2021. However, municipalities in their answers showed determination to integrate the newly added territories and the youth. The largest municipality in Latvia reported having problems with planning youth work, especially after the reforms.

Second, municipalities are struggling to come up with strategic planning for youth policies and are lacking professionals as well as funding. These problems are interconnected and could be prevented by granting more funding to youth work and making it a priority. As one of the respondents pointed out,

youth work should be a different department, separated from education and culture. Multiple respondents reported that their municipalities had benefitted from youth participation – the youth develop tourism ideas, repair nature trails, help Ukrainian refugees, set up their own studying space, and help the lonely elders. It must be understood by the decision-makers that the youth must be a priority also because they give back to the community, and in their hands is the future.

Third, the municipalities struggle with designating a specific budget for youth organizations. Only six municipalities had a specific budget, one of the municipalities reported it was €700 which proved the gravity of the situation of youth organization funding. 11 municipalities mentioned they had youth project initiative contests for the youth organizations to participate in, which is commendable. However, funding remains a problem.

Fourth, when/if the amendments to the Youth law are accepted, the municipalities will struggle with introducing new youth centers, youth consultative commissions, and youth councils, to comply with the amendments. 3 of the respondents reported their municipalities did not have any of these platforms established and adapting in a qualitative way will be rather challenging for these municipalities.

Five, this research shows youth participation is different from one municipality to another and is heavily impacted by the youth work policy of the municipality. It is not only a problem that young people get more opportunities in the cities than in the rural opportunities, but also that young people get different amounts of participation possibilities in different municipalities. The amendments in the Youth law will welcome positive changes in the current youth work system, and the municipalities will be pressured to give youth work more funding, and municipalities will have to be more equal because all will be required to establish new platforms for youth participation. But the inequality will remain, due to the different priorities of each municipality.