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# Challenges and Solutions – New Ways of Children's Participation in Municipal Decisions in the Light of the Case of the Municipality of Lublin and the Municipality of Budapest*

*Wyzwania i rozwiązania – nowe formy udziału dzieci w podejmowaniu decyzji na poziomie gminnym na przykładzie gminy Lublin i gminy Budapeszt*

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of children in decision-making poses a challenge for public bodies. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child protects the right to express their views. However, in administrative decision-making, it is a challenge to enforce this principle, and the involvement of young people, especially children, in local decision-making is a crucial element of education for civic participation. The literature clearly demonstrates that children can express their views quite effectively on local affairs which impact them directly. It can be more significant in new democracies, where education for active participation in public life is even more important than in countries with long-established democratic traditions and institutions. This paper focuses on the analysis of the framework, challenges, and potential solutions for involving children and young people in municipal decision-making processes in Poland and Hungary. It should be noted that both countries belong to the relatively young democracies and have been building their democratic local government systems since the 1990s. The paper analyses the first regulations and solutions on the involvement of young people in local democracy, which were mainly institutionally centred and based on the representation of the children. We seek to demonstrate both the advantages and limitations of these representation-based solutions. Based on the limitations of these tools, new and more deliberative forms have evolved in Poland and Hungary. These developments have been linked to the digitalisation of decision-making processes and the digital environment that surrounds young people. These models, however, have challenges, and even these e-solutions have strong limitations. Another important issue is the analysis of opportunities for the participation of particularly vulnerable groups of children in these initiatives, especially children with disabilities and migrant children. The article also explores the challenges and opportunities associated with their inclusion. An important part of the initiatives discussed is the development of effective solutions. Therefore, the authors focus on the challenges of piloting such tools and institutions. Based on the development of the former solutions, the article formulates policy recommendations aimed at strengthening children's participation at the local level in new democracies. These recommendations are based on the experiences of the European Youth Capital 2023 project in Lublin and on policies promoting the involvement of children in municipal decision-making in Budapest. In addition, one of the bases of the presentation is a current CLAP ("Children's Involvement in Local Affairs for Active Participation") project, which aims to enhance children's participation based on a piloted in cooperation with local authorities.

**Keywords:** children's participation; public participation; deliberative tools; municipal decision-making; local public policies; local actions

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## INTRODUCTION

The significance of participation in decision-making regarding public services and local and regional development has increased over the last decades. This trend has been strengthened by globalization and the intensification of global competition, and it is also related to the emergence of grassroots and deliberative tools of local democracy.[1] Different approaches to the interpretation of development policies have evolved, and these approaches are linked to various models of multilevel governance. As emphasized by L. Hooghe and G. Marks, multilevel governance can be interpreted as a by-product of the administrative transformation of recent decades, particularly the rise of supranational governance (especially in Europe, but also in North America) and the increasing role of subnational units.[2] As part of this transformation, the importance of local development has been strengthened. Local development, as one the key components of local public policy, is similarly related to public participation. These transformations are also linked to the rise of local direct democracy. By the end of the 20th century, citizens increasingly demanded the establishment of transparent, personalised, and accountable administrative structures, which in turn transformed the relationships between strategic decision-making bodies and the professional and political leadership of municipalities.[3] Also linked to the need for more transparency and better control were movements which stressed the need for structures that were closer to the citizen and thus more accessible and easier to control for local residents.[4] Similarly, the co-creation approach of public services has been strongly based on involving citizens in decision-making processes and not only considering them as "consumers" of those services.[5] These issues are even more interesting in countries that have experienced democratic backsliding and centralisation reforms. Due to the constant centralisation and the decreasing role of local governments, municipalities should find new roles to compensate for the loss of traditional local tasks and duties. Therefore, Hungary and Poland could be considered as interesting examples.

Another challenge for traditional administrative systems has been the increasing significance of the rights of vulnerable groups. This trend has been supported

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[1] See A. Pike, A. Rodríguez-Pose, J. Tomaney, *Local and Regional Development*, London–New York 2017.

[2] See L. Hooghe, G. Marks, *Multi-Level Governance and European Integration*, Oxford–Lanham 2001.

[3] See T. Bergström, A. Gianoli, A. Rao, *Strong Leadership and Local Democracy: Rivals or Potential Allies?*, [in:] *Renewal in European Local Democracies: Puzzles, Dilemmas and Options*, eds. L. Schaap, H. Daemen, Wiesbaden 2012, pp. 133–134.

[4] See G. Marcou, I. Verebélyi (eds.), *New Trends in Local Government in Western and Eastern Europe*, Brussels 1993, p. 244.

[5] See E. Loeffler, *Co-Production of Public Services and Outcomes*, Cham 2021, pp. 249–252.

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not only by transformations in national constitutions but also by international conventions, particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As part of these developments, children's rights and child participation have become increasingly incorporated into governance and decision-making systems. While democratic education is of fundamental importance from early childhood, this research concentrates primarily on adolescents aged 12 to 17. This group remains excluded from formal electoral participation, and therefore its involvement in local decision-making depends almost entirely on alternative, institutionally mediated participatory mechanisms. Our analysis is based on a project whose main aim is to develop policy recommendations for strengthening child participation at the local level. The project seeks to create a hands-on toolkit tailored to the needs of local communities, designed to enhance children's involvement in decision-making processes. It also aims to formulate recommendations on how local authorities can more effectively integrate children into these processes. Drawing on the concepts of co-creation and participation, these policy recommendations may also serve as useful and applicable tools for local development. This paper summarises the results of the first phase of the project, which is about the conceptualisation and the analysis of the institutional framework of the children's participation.

## METHODS

The aim of this presentation is to provide an overview of the modes of citizen participation, with a particular focus on children's participation as a tool for local development in Hungary and Poland. Our research follows the approach of jurisprudence and administrative sciences. After a short analysis of the participatory tools of the Hungarian municipal system, we examine the conceptual framework, especially the concept of co-creation as the background of children's participation. The literature emphasises that participatory tools have a significant impact on civic participation in town and urban municipalities.[6] Therefore, we will mention that it has an impact on trust in public administration, and it could be interpreted as a tool against democratic backsliding, because it helps to educate young citizens to participate in public life.

The paper presents reflections based on the first preliminary findings of a survey on youth policy and public participation, which was sent and partially completed

[6] See M. De Vries, J. Nemec, D. Špaček, T. Genro, *The Diffusion of Participatory Budgeting: An Introduction to This Volume – With an Intermezzo by Tarso Genro, the Mayor of Porto Alegre Between 1992 and 1996*, [in:] *International Trends in Participatory Budgeting*, eds. M.S. De Vries, J. Nemec, D. Špaček, Cham 2022, pp. 3–5.

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by the three participating municipalities of the project: in Hungary, the Capital Municipality of Budapest and the Municipality of the Ninth District of Budapest (Ferencváros), and in Poland, the Municipality of Lublin. The survey examined the regulatory framework, organisational architecture, and budgetary conditions underpinning local mechanisms of children's participation. It also included questions concerning planned reforms and the municipalities' alignment of children's participation policies with other relevant sectoral policies, such as cultural, educational, social and child-care, transportation, and parks and recreation policies. All three municipalities, involving a broad range of administrative departments, completed the questionnaire.

## ANALYSIS: LOCAL PARTICIPATION AND CO-CREATION

### 1. Deliberative tools of local governance, including participation of the youth

First of all, it should be emphasised that municipalities influence the everyday lives of citizens in a variety of ways. Although different approaches to local governance exist, municipalities are generally responsible for the provision of numerous local public services. These services are primarily related to human services; therefore, social care, child protection, childcare, healthcare, public education, and cultural services are mainly provided by local authorities. Consequently, the governance and management of these services play a significant role in local public life.[7]

During the 1990s, traditional municipal decision-making processes began to by partially transformed. Participatory budgeting emerged in the early 1990s in Brazil as a response to criticism of traditional representative local democracy.[8] The primary aim of these reforms was to introduce grassroots decision-making procedures that would enable the involvement of local citizens and increase trust in municipal decision-making. These reforms were primarily introduced by larger, mainly urban municipalities, where decision-making was too far from the citizens, and these traditional forms of decision-making had been criticised as decisions made in an ivory tower.[9]

The application of participatory tools increased by the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT). The ICT revolution enabled public administrations to introduce electronic interfaces for submitting recommendations,

[7] See S. Kukovič, *How to Lead a Locality: Evidence from Local Political Leaders in Slovenia*, "Croatian and Comparative Public Administration" 2017, vol. 17(2), pp. 168–170.

[8] See B. Wampler, S. McNulty, M. Touchton, *Participatory Budgeting in Global Perspective*, Oxford 2021, pp. 3–5.

[9] See S. Grohs, *Participatory Administration and Co-production*, [in:] *Public Administration in Germany*, eds. S. Kuhlmann, I. Proeller, D. Schimanke, J. Ziekow, Cham 2021, pp. 316–318.

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proposals, and opinions, even electronic voting systems. However, a paradox can be observed. If deliberative tools offer the possibility of decision-making, a higher level of identity verification is required. Yet this more bureaucratic model may discourage citizens from participating. Conversely, if identification is not strict, then this model can be interpreted only a collection of opinions, and legally the decision could not be binding, although they may reflect broader public opinion and often attract higher levels of participation.[10]

It should be emphasised that in Poland and Hungary, participatory initiatives and participatory budgeting can largely be interpreted as a top-down phenomenon. This top-down nature is even more visible in Poland, where larger municipalities are obliged to establish participatory budgeting for city districts. However, when these tools have been established by several larger urban municipalities as facultative municipal tasks, their introduction was the initiative of the leaders of the cities, and they were not initiated by the movement of citizens.[11] The preliminary results indicate that both Budapest (especially the Capital Municipality and, to a lesser extent, the Ninth District – Ferencváros) and Lublin have introduced different participatory initiatives. The most important of these is participatory budgeting system but even special dialogues and initiatives have been established as facultative municipal tasks. In Budapest, these changes were linked to the political programme of the newly elected Mayor of the Capital City, who promised to introduce grassroots decision-making tools during the 2019 election campaign. This was realised when the new tools were established in 2020 (the elections were in Autumn 2019). As we have mentioned in Lublin, there was mandatory participatory budgeting, but it was expanded in 2022–2023, especially the tools directly focusing on the involvement of the youth. The acceleratory factor of these reforms was that Lublin won the title of the European Youth Capital in 2023. Both in preparation for this title and during its implementation, as well as through subsequent follow-up activities, a number of new participatory instruments were introduced by the municipality.

However, when examining the situation in Poland and Hungary, it should be emphasised that the main issues related to participatory budgeting they a predominantly top-down approach, as these instruments are primarily supported by local (and partially national) elites. There are also significant differences between the two countries. As mentioned above, youth policy and, consequently, youth participation in public life, is more coordinated in Poland. One of the municipalities examined, the Municipality of Lublin, introduced several special initiatives which

[10] See Y. Sintoner, A. Röcke, C. Herzberg, *Participatory Budgeting in Europe: Democracy and Public Governance*, London–New York 2015, pp. 41–44.

[11] See J. Džinić, M. Murray Svidroňová, E. Markowska-Bzducha, *Participatory Budgeting: A Comparative Study of Croatia, Poland and Slovakia*, "The NISPACEE Journal of Public Administration and Policy" 2016, vol. 9(2), pp. 41–42.

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have been related to its project "Lublin – European Youth Capital 2023". It should be noted that these tools have been permanently institutionalised. However, budgetary frameworks have become more limited after the project. During the project year, the budget allocated to youth-related policies in Lublin was around EUR 3.6 million (PLN 15.44 million), whereas in 2025 this framework decreased to around EUR 0.75 million (PLN 3.2 million). Despite this reduction, these initiatives have been maintained and incorporated into broader municipal activities and policies.

## 2. Co-creation and deliberative tools

Deliberative tools are closely related to the concept of co-creation.[12] As mentioned above, municipalities are responsible for key local public services, the majority of which are directly linked to children's needs, such as education, childcare, and youth policy. Other local policies also significantly affect children's lives, including local spatial planning, for example through the design of child-friendly streets and public spaces.

If we look at the public management reforms, it should be emphasised that the post-World War II welfare state paradigm focused on the provision of public services as a public responsibility. However, this state-centred paradigm changed during the reforms of the New Public Management. This approach focused on the persons as "consumers" of these services, while the approach of their legal protection and involvement could be interpreted as a "consumer protection" nature. This model has been transformed since the late 1980s and early 1990s. The paradigms of New Public Services and New Public Governance changed this approach by interpreting public services, especially welfare, cultural, and educational services, as services created by institutions, service providers, and citizens. In this framework, individuals are no longer seen as "consumers" but as co-creators of public services.[13]

Based on the concept of co-creation of these services, citizen participation in service provision and the policy making on services has become an important issue. It seems that involving citizens is often easier in smaller municipalities, where more grassroots and less formal administration practices prevail.[14] Therefore, the

[12] See V. Đulabić, *Public Administration Complexity and Its Implications on Theory, Research and Practice*, "Studia Iuridica Lublinensia" 2025, vol. 34(1), pp. 65–66.

[13] See C. Pollitt, G. Bouckaert, *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis – Into the Age of Austerity*, Oxford 2017, pp. 14–28.

[14] See I. Hoffman, *Nem községeknek való vidék? – Fakultatív községi feladatok, különös tekintettel a COVID-19-pandémia időszakára*, [in:] *A vidéki Magyarország a pandémia korában: IX. Falukonferencia*, eds. R. Horeczki, T. Szabó, Pécs 2022, pp. 58–59.

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participation in public services as part of the co-creation of them evolved mainly in urban municipalities and have become an integral part of urban governance.[15]

Participation tools have evolved in different ways. It should be emphasised that some have been incorporated into legal regulations governing municipalities. For example, most European municipal systems – including those in Poland and Hungary – include provisions for mandatory public hearings. Similarly, participatory budgeting has become an established instrument. In Poland, for instance, there are regulations on participatory budgeting, and even in smaller municipalities, there are so-called village funds, which allow the involvement of the citizens of sub-municipal units in the local decision-making.[16]

Other solutions in legal regulation have been developed by sectoral regulations for co-creation and for the involvement of citizens. Some of them have roots in former regulations. For example, in the field of education, the duties and powers of student councils have been strengthened by the reforms on public education; thus, they have significant responsibilities in public schools, and their consent is required for important issues.[17] As part of these reforms, similar councils of the recipients of benefits and services have evolved in the field of social care and childcare. A comparable sectoral reform was the establishment of Local Involvement Networks in the United Kingdom within the National Health Service in 2008 (which was dissolved in 2013).[18] Consultative bodies have therefore become an important part of participatory governance. This pattern fits within the representative nature of local governance, as it ensures the involvement of service recipients and stakeholders. These bodies can be interpreted as special, advisory councils and committees of the municipal bodies. However, even this representative and mainly top-down nature resulted important criticism on these bodies.[19]

## 3. Co-creation, public participation and their links to fundamental rights

As established in the previous section, the co-creation of public services cannot be realised without the meaningful involvement of citizens in policy-making processes, which in turn contributes to the improvement of service quality. From the

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[15] See D.H. Lund, *Co-creation in Urban Governance: From Inclusion to Innovation*, "Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration" 2018, vol. 22(2), pp. 5–7.

[16] See J. Džinić, M. Murray Svidroňová, E. Markowska-Bzducha, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

[17] See R. Dacombe, M. Wojciechowska, *Social Choice and Citizen Participation: Bringing Democratic Theory to Public Administration*, "Political Studies Review" 2024, vol. 22(4), pp. 723–724.

[18] See A. Arden, C. Baker, J. Manning, *Local Government Constitutional and Administrative Law*, London 2008, pp. 120–121.

[19] See É. Szabó, K. Dancs, *Hungary: Participation Crisis, Disappointed Youths*, [in:] *Young People and Active Citizenship in Post-Soviet Times: A Challenge for Citizenship Education*, eds. B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, A.M. Zalewska, K.J. Kennedy, London–New York 2018, pp. 128–132.

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perspective of citizens, this is grounded in the right to participate in public affairs (Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).

Although the right to public participation encompasses non-electoral activities, its primary instrument has traditionally been understood as the right to vote in periodic elections. A significant development in the context of children's participation is that the automatic requirement of attaining the age of majority is no longer tenable, even in relation to the right to vote. While voting rights are still commonly reserved for individuals aged 18 and above in most European countries, several jurisdictions – for example Austria, Greece, Estonia, Malta, and certain regions of Germany and the United Kingdom – allow voting from the age of 16 or 17 in national or local elections.[20] Although reasonable restrictions, such as setting a minimum voting age, have traditionally been accepted as compatible with the right to vote, in recent years the potentially discriminatory character of the 18-year age limit has been increasingly challenged.[21] Accordingly, this age limit and the exclusion of children from voting can no longer be automatically considered constitutionally justifiable.

From the perspective of children's rights, the generally acknowledged point of departure is the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While the Convention does not explicitly guarantee the right to public participation, the interpretation of Article 12 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child clearly points in that direction. In its General Comment No. 12, the Committee emphasizes that children's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them covers not only family or individual matters, but also public affairs, including the law-making, policy development, and service provision. According to this reading, involving children in the co-creation of services or in policy development is not optional, but an integral part of the right to be heard. In other words, children's participation in public affairs is considered a key element in fulfilling the States' duties under Article 12.[22]

Children are holders of fundamental rights without any conditions or discrimination. However, it is a matter of fact that children's decision-making capacity is still developing and differs from what is generally expected of adults. Children's evolving decision-making capacity may affect their right to exercise their fundamental rights (active legal capacity). Nevertheless, this cannot justify the automatic exclusion of children from meaningful involvement in decision-making processes,

[20] See European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Mapping Minimum Age Requirements Concerning the Rights of the Child in the EU*, 20.11.2017, https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/mapping-minimum-age-requirements-concerning-rights-child-eu (access: 4.6.2026).

[21] *Make It 16 Incorporated v Attorney-General*, Supreme Court of New Zealand, MR [2022] NZSC 134; *Amelia Penney-Crocker et al. v The Attorney General of Canada*. See also C. Milne, *Legality of Age Restrictions on Voting: A Canadian Perspective*, [in:] *Exploring Children's Suffrage Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ageless Voting*, ed. J. Wall, Cham 2022.

[22] General Comment No. 12 (2009) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: The right of the child to be heard, 20 July 2009, para. 12, pp. 127–131.

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based solely on their age, level of maturity, or vulnerable status.[23] The State's positive obligations towards children require that participation mechanisms be adapted to their evolving capacities and vulnerable status. States are also expected to actively foster children's capacity for meaningful participation through the tools of democratic education. This approach highlights that the means and modalities of child participation are key factors in the realisation of fundamental rights and in assessing the justifiability (proportionality) of limitations on children's rights.

This is reflected in the three examined municipal policies. All municipalities provide opportunities to participate in deliberative institutions. In Budapest, children over the age of 14 can take part in participatory budgeting. In Lublin, initiatives are primarily open for persons over 14 years of age, although some initiatives (such as competitions) are also accessible to younger children. It should be noted that, as a result of this approach, four large projects funded through participatory budgeting in Budapest were related to youth policies, especially cultural request of youth persons (e.g., street art projects).

In Budapest, the participatory budgeting framework is relatively significant, amounting to approximately 1 billion HUF (around EUR 2.5 million), which represents 0.29% of the annual budget of the Capital Municipality. As a result, these activities can allocate relatively significant amounts. However, the Ninth District of Budapest has a very limited participatory budgeting framework (in 2025, HUF 20 million, approximately EUR 50,000, representing only 0.04% of the annual budget of Ferencváros). Nevertheless, several programmes were related to youth policy, such as the Halloween Ball at the József Attila Housing Estate.

In Lublin, participatory budgeting also plays an important role, and its financial framework is even more significant than in the capital city of Budapest. The wining projects were similarly strongly related to youth, as well. In addition, Lublin has developed complementary instruments in the form of "applications" and "competitions" organised by the Municipal Office. However, the sums were less significant (between PLN 5,000 and 9,000, around EUR 1,150 and 2,100), but they were targeted directly to schools and youth communities and can therefore be interpreted as participatory budgeting–like tools. These "competitions" were originally linked to the European Youth Capital project, but they remained even after the Youth Capital year (2023).

Finally, from a fundamental rights perspective, the provision of public services is based on social and cultural rights. These so-called second-generation fundamental rights are generally not regarded as enforceable in mainstream legal thinking, meaning that claims concerning the quality of services are usually not justiciable. This further highlights the importance of participation. Co-creation

[23] See A. Lápossy, B. Somody, *Tényleg vannak a gyermekeknek alapjogaik?*, "Fundamentum" 2025, vol. 28(1).

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achieved through participatory mechanisms may improve the quality of the services concerned, thereby enabling the right to participation to contribute to the realisation of other rights as well.

## 4. Children's participation: a change of paradigm in Poland and Hungary

Children and youth participation can be interpreted as a sensitive issue in the field of co-creation and citizen participation. As we mentioned above, children can be regarded as a vulnerable group, and their (active) legal capacity in public issues is generally limited. However, there is a growing trend to strengthen the role of politically conscious teenagers in public decisions. This issue is therefore sensitive, because the democratic education of the future generations is an important guarantee against democratic backsliding: it is an important part of political socialisation.[24]

Hungary and Poland present a particularly interesting context in this regard. It should be emphasised that both countries are post-communist and have faced democratic backsliding in the last two decades; therefore, the framework for youth and children's participation is quite important. It should also be noted that during the communist period, both countries had centralised children's and youth organisations directed by communist parties, following the patterns of the Soviet system (for children between 6–7 to 14, the "Pioneers", and for young people over 14, communist youth alliances, following the pattern of the Soviet Komsomol).[25] These politically strongly controlled, top-down organisations had a significant influence on youth policy, and their legacy, especially the top-down approach, has partially remained.[26]

During the democratic transition, both countries developed new forms of participation that were partially influenced by the past but try to build more community-based solutions. In Poland, several municipalities – first of all Częstochowa – organised local Youth Councils as advisory bodies to municipal authorities. This example was followed by several Polish cities, and in 1996 an umbrella organisation, the National Federation of Youth City Councils, was established. Even the amended Polish Municipal Code has a regulation on the Youth Councils: Article 5b thereof states that this task and these bodies can be interpreted as a voluntary municipal task. The regulation on the membership of the youth councils belong to the competencies of the municipalities, but there are recommendations by the above-mentioned National Federation, which are mainly followed. Only those

[24] See É. Szabó, K. Dancs, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–130.

[25] See J. Leek, *Decentralization Policies Concerning Leadership of Parents and Students in School Councils in Poland: From Autocracy to Democracy within the State Monopoly*, "International Journal of Leadership in Education" 2019, vol. 25(1), pp. 23–24.

[26] See É. Szabó, K. Dancs, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

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city, district, and regional youth councils can be members of the National Federation, which follows these guidelines. It should be noted that these councils have strong democratic legitimation, because they are elected directly, the elections are organised by the public education institutions, and they follow the example of the municipal elections as part of the democratic education. Campaigning and debates are similarly regulated. However, this democratic legitimation strengthens their positions, but even this system is criticised, because it became part of the recruitment and training of future politicians and thus top-down elements could be observed, as well.[27] In Lublin, another problematic issue can be detected. Lublin is the largest university city in eastern Poland, and it has a substantial student population, with nearly 60,000 students attending its nine higher education institutions. (Lublin has a population of nearly 325,000 inhabitants, thus around 18.5% of the population belongs to the students.) More than 6,700 international students are studying in Lublin. However, most students have only temporary residence in the city. Based on the general regulations and recommendations and on the decision of the City Council, only students and children with permanent residence are eligible to vote in youth council elections. Thus, the majority of the students are excluded from this form of participation. It should be noted that these bodies are involved into the decision-making process of other sectoral policies which are related to the welfare and well-being of youth.

In Hungary, a similar pattern can be observed in that the establishment of municipal youth councils belongs to the voluntary tasks of the local government. The Hungarian national umbrella organisation, the National Youth Council, was established only in 2015, because of the strong ideological and political division between Hungarian youth organisations. This youth council is the umbrella of the national youth NGOs, while municipal bodies are just limitedly represented by it. At the municipal tier, the top-down approach is even more visible: these councils are mainly delegated by youth NGOs, and the "youth elections" can be interpreted as an exception. Similarly to the general trends, in Hungary these youth councils have been mainly organised by urban municipalities and have been strongly Budapest-centred.[28]

However, several differences should be noted. Co-creation and the involvement of younger generations can be interpreted as part of both the Polish and Hungarian systems, with urban municipalities playing a particularly active role in this policy area. The Polish system is based on elections and seeks to simulate municipal electoral processes, thereby focusing on the preparation of future youth voters. As

[27] See N. Lubik-Reczek, *The Standards of Youth Councils' Operation in Poland: An Attempt at Analysis*, "Przegląd Prawa Konstytucyjnego" 2020, vol. 58(6), pp. 61–63.

[28] See Á. Nagy, L. Székely, *Civil ifjúság – szervezetek*, "Új Ifjúsági Szemle" 2008, vol. 6(2), pp. 184–187.

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a result, it enjoys relatively strong democratic legitimacy compared to the ad hoc Hungarian system. However, this form of participation is less grassroots in nature, as it is primarily grounded in the logic of representative democracy. A common feature of both systems is that these bodies function as consultative organs of municipalities. They may formulate opinions and recommendations, while final decisions are taken by municipal authorities (such as councils, committees, and mayors). Even there are differences, the predominantly top-down character of these models remains a key challenge, and it should also be noted that they are strongly.

## DISCUSSION

As can be seen, children's participation has an established organisational framework in both Poland and Hungary. However, this framework also contains significant top-down elements, and these bodies – when organised by municipalities – can primarily be interpreted as consultative structures. At the same time, these bodies may also be understood as tools for municipal development. Young people play an important role in local public life, and even the long-term decisions of the local government influence their lives. Thus, as part of the planning activities, their opinion could be important, even the involvement of older young people, especially those aged 12–14 and above. Their participation in the decision-making may offer alternative perspectives and contribute to more well-founded local policies. It should be emphasised that this applies not only to policies directly related to children and youth – such as participation mechanisms, community and cultural services, and education policies – but also to broader policy areas, like urban planning, budgetary planning, sustainability policies, and public transport. The involvement of children and young people in public service provision planning and general planning activities can be interpreted as a development tool. Thus, these participatory policies and instruments are also a development tool, because the efficiency of policy-making and the enforcement of these policies can be better if the trust in these actions can be enhanced. This approach represents the practical implementation of the above-mentioned co-creation and fundamental rights approach in everyday activities and short-to-long-term planning.

It should be emphasised that the grassroots and deliberative elements of youth and children's participation should be strengthened through future reforms, particularly in Poland and Hungary. The current systems, which partly rely on top-down approaches, also contain certain dysfunctional elements. Thus, it is important to preserve the results of existing youth council systems while introducing more direct participatory mechanisms, through which the voices of local youth and children's communities can be better incorporated into decision-making processes. It could be a supplementary element to this system, and another pillar of a development and sustainability-based approach.

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As can be seen, although the socio-economic background of the cities examined is similar, the involvement of youth and children in Budapest and Lublin differs significantly. These differences stem from varying national contexts, degrees of institutionalisation, and other contextual factors, which influence both the development and the scope of participatory policies.

The joint CHILD-24-CERV CLAP ("Children's Involvement in Local Affairs for Active Participation") project seeks to develop a multi-pillar, participatory policy toolkit that can be piloted in selected municipalities, namely in Lublin and in Budapest (at the first-tier level, the Ninth District). In this sense, this article may be understood as a conceptualisation of the possible directions for future development, based on a literature review and the initial findings of the above-mentioned survey.

## CONCLUSIONS

The paper explored how the concept of co-creation of public services intersects with children's right to participate in public affairs. We argued that meaningful participation in municipal policy development and decision-making is not only a matter of good governance, but also a legal obligation under fundamental and children's rights. Through the analysis of Hungarian and Polish administrative and policy contexts, we demonstrated that the practical implementation of child participation often remains fragmented or instrumental, despite existing normative frameworks. At the same time, we highlighted that co-creation, when realised through meaningful participatory tools, has the potential to enhance the quality of public services, thereby also contributing to the fulfilment of children's social and cultural rights.

The article has developed this interdisciplinary conceptual framework as a foundation for the joint Hungarian–Polish CHILD-24-CERV CLAP project, which aims to design a child participation toolkit tailored to local needs and to integrate it into the decision-making processes of the municipalities involved.

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ABSTRAKT

Angażowanie dzieci w procesy decyzyjne stanowi istotne wyzwanie dla organów publicznych. Art. 12 Konwencji ONZ o prawach dziecka chroni prawo do wyrażania przez dzieci własnych poglądów. Jednak nawet w kontekście administracyjnego podejmowania decyzji egzekwowanie tej zasady napotyka trudności, a włączanie młodych ludzi, zwłaszcza dzieci, w lokalne procesy decyzyjne stanowi kluczowy element edukacji do uczestnictwa obywatelskiego. Na podstawie literatury przedmiotu można stwierdzić, że dzieci są w stanie skutecznie artykułować swoje stanowisko w sprawach lokalnych, które bezpośrednio ich dotyczą. Kwestia ta nabiera szczególnego znaczenia w nowych demokracjach, w których edukacja na rzecz aktywnego uczestnictwa w życiu publicznym jest jeszcze ważniejsza niż w państwach posiadających ugruntowane tradycje i instytucje demokratyczne. Artykuł poświęcony jest analizie ram prawnych, wyzwań oraz możliwych rozwiązań dotyczących udziału dzieci i młodzieży w podejmowaniu decyzji na szczeblu gminnym w Polsce i na Węgrzech. Należy zaznaczyć, że oba państwa należą do grona nowych demokracji i od lat 90. XX w. budują swoje systemy demokratycznego samorządu lokalnego. W artykule omówiono pierwsze regulacje prawne i rozwiązania dotyczące udziału młodych ludzi w lokalnych procesach demokratycznych. Były one ukierunkowane przede wszystkim instytucjonalnie i opierały się na modelu reprezentacji dzieci. Autorzy wskazują zarówno zalety, jak i ograniczenia rozwiązań opartych na tym modelu. W odpowiedzi na stwierdzone ograniczenia tradycyjnych narzędzi w Polsce i na Węgrzech wykształciły się nowe, bardziej deliberatywne formy uczestnictwa, powiązane z procesem cyfryzacji podejmowania decyzji oraz z cyfrowym środowiskiem otaczającym młodych ludzi. Modele te rodzą jednak własne wyzwania, a opisywane rozwiązania elektroniczne mają wyraźne ograniczenia. Odrębnym ważnym zagadnieniem jest analiza możliwości udziału w tych inicjatywach szczególnie wrażliwych grup dzieci, zwłaszcza dzieci z niepełnosprawnościami oraz dzieci będących migrantami. Artykuł obejmuje również analizę zagrożeń i szans związanych z ich włączeniem. Istotnym elementem omawianych działań jest budowanie skutecznych rozwiązań, dlatego autorzy koncentrują się na wyzwaniach związanych z pilotażowym wdrażaniem takich narzędzi i instytucji. W oparciu o dotychczasowe

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rozwiązania sformułowano rekomendacje polityczne na rzecz wzmocnienia uczestnictwa dzieci na szczeblu lokalnym w nowych demokracjach. Rekomendacje te opierają się na doświadczeniach projektu „Europejska Stolica Młodych 2023" w Lublinie oraz na politykach dotyczących udziału dzieci w podejmowaniu decyzji na poziomie gminnym w Budapeszcie. Jedną z podstaw prezentacji jest również aktualnie realizowany projekt CLAP („Children's Involvement in Local Affairs for Active Participation"), którego celem jest wzmocnienie uczestnictwa dzieci poprzez pilotażowe działania prowadzone we współpracy z organami samorządu lokalnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** udział dzieci; partycypacja publiczna; narzędzia deliberatywne; podejmowanie decyzji na szczeblu gminnym; lokalne polityki publiczne; działania lokalne

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