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Exploring the Role of Citizens' Associations in Shaping Decision-Making Processes in North Macedonia

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Abstract

The main purpose of this research is to present a study analysis of the notion of interest groups, especially citizens' associations in the Republic of North Macedonia and their participation in public policy development. Interest groups can be defined as formal organizations that strive to reach their goals through influencing decision-making processes. These groups are considered as non-political, but they rather deal with the "politics of politics."

This research paper actually analyses the impact of citizens' associations on local government in the Republic of North Macedonia and to what extent the citizens take part in the compilation of public policy. For this research, a questionnaire has been prepared and 200 citizens living in Skopje have been contacted by phone, and the achieved results and statistical data show that still the participation of citizens in public policy is not at the proper level. The level of cooperation between citizens and local government, i.e. municipalities, is still at a low level. There is an institutional weakness and low implementation capacity, which limits the voice and participation of citizens in local affairs. This institutional gap also undermines the principles of the rule of law, equal access to justice, as many citizens remain excluded from meaningful decision-making processes, and their rights are not fully safeguarded in practice.

There is a need to raise citizens' awareness and convince them that the voice of citizens in municipalities should be heard, i.e. they should speak loudly. Strengthening the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice are therefore essential for enabling genuine democratic participation and for enhancing trust between citizens and institutions. Finally, it is concluded that during the decision-making processes in North Macedonia, nongovernmental and international organizations have given a great contribution with their activities.

Keywords: Citizens' Associations, Decision-making, Equal Access, Democratic Participation

Introduction

Interest groups constitute one of the fundamental pillars of pluralist democracies. They can be broadly defined as organized collectives of individuals or institutions who share similar positions, values, or concerns on particular political, economic, social, or cultural issues. Such groups are formed with the purpose of influencing decision-making processes, shaping public opinion, and contributing to the broader social and political agenda (Britannica). In this sense, interest groups operate as intermediaries between the state and society, articulating and aggregating citizens' needs and aspirations, and ensuring that diverse voices are represented within the policymaking sphere.

A widely accepted definition describes an interest group as "any association of individuals or organizations, usually formally organized, that, on the basis of one or more shared concerns, attempts to influence public policy in its favor." (Plano & Greenberg, 1985, p. 231). This definition highlights two essential aspects of interest groups: their organized nature and their intention to affect policy outcomes without directly seeking governmental office. Unlike political parties, which compete in elections to gain control of public institutions, interest groups function as advocacy actors that employ lobbying, consultation, public campaigns, and expert engagement to shape political agendas and legislative processes.

From the standpoint of pluralist theory, scholars such as Robert A. Dahl and David B. Truman view interest groups as indispensable to democratic governance. Dahl argues that political power in modern democracies is dispersed among a variety of organized groups, each competing for influence and thereby preventing the concentration of authority in the hands of a single elite (Dahl, 1961). Similarly, Truman emphasizes that group interaction is a natural and necessary feature of democratic life, as it provides an institutional mechanism for balancing conflicting demands and promoting social equilibrium (Truman, 1951). Within this framework, interest groups are not merely pressure actors but integral components of the democratic process itself. They ensure that governance remains responsive to a plurality of social interests, thereby contributing to political stability and legitimacy.

Building on this idea, Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba's civic culture theory underscores the importance of active citizen participation through associations and organizations as a precondition for a stable democratic order (Almond & Verba, 1963). Interest groups serve this participatory function by creating opportunities for citizens to engage in public life, voice their concerns, and hold decision-makers

accountable. In this regard, they perform both representative and educational roles—facilitating the communication of social needs to the state while simultaneously fostering civic awareness and political responsibility among their members.

The range of organizations that fall under the category of interest groups is extensive. These include trade unions, chambers of commerce, professional associations, youth and women's organizations, cultural and artistic societies, organizations of war veterans and disabled persons, farmers' associations, religious communities, and ethnic associations. Although these entities are formally independent of the state, they frequently cooperate with public authorities and play a consultative role in various stages of policy formulation. Their activities often contribute to social cohesion and pluralistic dialogue within democratic institutions.

The importance of organized interest groups becomes particularly evident in their capacity to facilitate compromise among diverse social forces. Without their presence, reconciling conflicting interests within a complex society would be significantly more difficult. Associations and civic organizations thus act as vital mediating structures within civil society, linking citizens to political institutions and providing legitimate channels through which social interests can be expressed and negotiated. Consequently, they not only influence policy outcomes but also reinforce the legitimacy and accountability of democratic governance.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, interest groups and civic associations have increasingly become active participants in the political process, particularly in the context of the country's democratization and the consolidation of civil society. Over the years, various organizations have emerged, reflecting the pluralism of interests and values characteristic of Macedonian society. These organizations play an essential role in articulating citizens' interests, promoting social inclusion, and enhancing participatory democracy at both national and local levels.

The *Law on Self-Government* provides a formal framework for citizen participation and civic engagement. In Chapter Four, it explicitly recognizes the right of citizens to participate directly in the decision-making processes of local self-government. Article 25 stipulates that "the citizens shall participate directly in the decision-making process on issues of local relevance through civil initiative, meetings of citizens, and referendum." (Official Gazette of RNM, 5/2002). This provision institutionalizes one of the key principles of democratic governance—the active involvement of citizens in public affairs. In this context, the development and functioning of interest groups in North Macedonia do not merely represent expressions of pluralism

but serve as fundamental conditions for the consolidation of participatory democracy and the strengthening of civil society.

The Local Self-Government

The Local Self-Government is the category of the constitutional law and political system. Regardless the degree of completion it means effort and request for participation, self-determination and self-governance. It characterizes the effort of people who more or less manage themselves with matters relating to its community affairs, either directly or as often, through representatives. The Local self-government is a form of the governance, local government units, ie the system of governance and political form in basic communities and wider political-administrative local units (countries, cities, municipalities, districts, departments, provinces, districts, regions). It is initially formed at communities in the sociological sense. The political activity is one of the most important features of the political process. Andrew Heywood in his study "Politics", to "what is the politics?" corresponds that it is above all social and collective. Politics exists and is realized among people to regulate their relations by making decisions or setting rules that apply to all. Otto von Bismarck, the German Chancellor, in one of his debates called politics as an art. By art Bismarck meant the art of governing, that contained also exercise control within the company by making and implementing collective decisions (Llambro, 2003).

There is no universally accepted definition for the civil organizations. However, according the UN definition, the civic organizations are...*non-profit, voluntary citizens groups organized on local, national and international levels, with the aim to raise questions of public interest. Goal-oriented and created by people sharing common interests, they provide a variety of services and humanitarian functions, represent the needs of the citizens in front of the governments, monitor policies and implementation of programmes and support the participation of civil sector on community level* (United Nations, n.d.)

At least five citizens of voting age, who are citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia, may establish an association. One or more founders may found a foundation and the founding capital shall be no less than 5,000.00 EUR in Denars counter-value, at the exchange rate for the day of the registration, as determined by the National Bank of North Macedonia (Delova, 2007).

According to many authors, the Citizens' Associations represent an important instrument for democracy and pluralism of modern society relations, support

processes and expanding individual participation and the free choice of individuals, namely construction of "capacity" for the development of civil association.

The participatory approach of making policies and laws on the EU level and its member states is enshrined in the Lisbon treaty. Specifically, Article 10 prescribes that: "Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen." (Treaty on European Union, 2016, Art. 10(3)). This also reflects obligations of local governments to work toward participatory democracy in light of EU endeavours. This quote can be found in the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union.

The Role and the Influence of Citizens' Associations in North Macedonia

As mentioned earlier, according to the Law on Associations of Citizens and Foundations since 1998, the two main legal forms of civil organizations in the Republic of North Macedonia are associations of citizens (membership organizations), the existence of which is related to bringing people and foundations which are based on union funds.

The role and influence of associations in the Republic of North Macedonia is manifested in several areas: public policy and fulfillment of social needs; strengthening of citizens, especially the strengthening of women and marginalized persons and informing and educating the citizens; impact of the national budget process; fight against corruption and asking responsibilities from private enterprises.

The area where the associations have been successful so far are at strengthening the citizens, especially the strengthening of marginalized persons and at informing and educating the citizens. The area of the associations as a moderate are influencing public policy and fulfillment of social needs. And the area where the associations have not achieved a lot, or not at all are the impact on the national budget process and asking responsibilities from private enterprises.

The Significance of the Study

This case-study investigated the influence of Citizens' Associations on local government during the decentralization process in the Republic of North Macedonia and to what extend the citizens of Skopje take part in compilation of public policy.

The city of Skopje as a capital of the Republic of North Macedonia has a special status and it has ten municipalities. Among the ten existing municipalities in Skopje, two municipalities are chosen. The municipality of Karposh and the Municipality of Chair. According to the last Census in 2021 the Municipality of Karposh has 63.760 inhabitants living in the area of 35,21 km² (City Population, 2021). The population is diverse, whereas the majority 88.52% are Ethnic Macedonians, 3.66% Serbians, 3.27% Albanians and the other ethnicities appear with a lower percentage (Municipality of Karposh, n.d.).

And according the last census, the Municipality of Chair has 64.773 inhabitants living in the area of 3.52 km², one of the municipalities with the highest density in Europe, 18.400 inhabitants living in 1 km². The population is mixed, 57% Albanians, 24.13%Macedonians, 6.95% Turkish, 4.76% Roma, 4.55% Bosnians, and the other ethnicities take part with lower that 1% (Municipality of Chair, n.d.)

This research paper also examined how much the citizens can be informed from the municipalities' official web sites. The official web site of Karposh offers two languages: Macedonian and English, and the web site of Chair is in three languages: Albanian, Macedonian and English.

Methods, Procedure and Results

The methods used for this research are of scientific overall statistical methods, where the data is presented in quantitative ways given in statistical tables. As an instrument to measure the citizens' knowledge for interest groups and associations and in what level they participate and influence to improve their lives on local level a questionnaire was compiled with the following questions:

1. Have you heard about interest groups?
2. Can you give a definition for an interest group?
3. Are citizens' associations active in your municipality?
4. Are you a member of any of the following associations?
5. If you are a member of any association, how often do you meet and discuss?
6. Is there any particular office in your municipality to discuss the actual problems?

Participants and Procedure:

The participants in the case-study were 200 citizens living in the City of Skopje, mixed nationalities Albanian, Macedonian, Turkish, Serbian, Bosnian, Roma, and Vlach. 100 citizens that were contacted live in the Municipality of Karposh and the other 100 citizens live in the Municipality of Chair. Materials from the official web-sites of these two municipalities were used, and the aim was to see if the citizens can be informed through the municipalities' web sites. Data were collected through a telephone survey conducted between January and February 2024. Every fifth listed household was selected using a systematic sampling technique based on landline telephone numbers available in the online directory (ZK, n.d.).

The Phone Survey Results

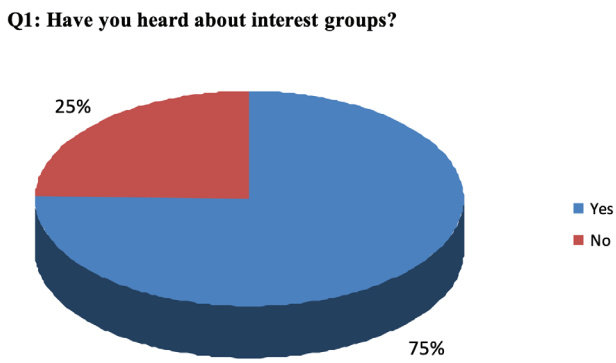


Figure 1: The average percentage of question 1 in both municipalities

For Question 1, all 100 respondents from the Municipality of Karpoš answered "yes", whereas 50 respondents from the Municipality of Čair provided the same response. The results are presented in the table below. A difference was observed in response behavior between the two municipalities.

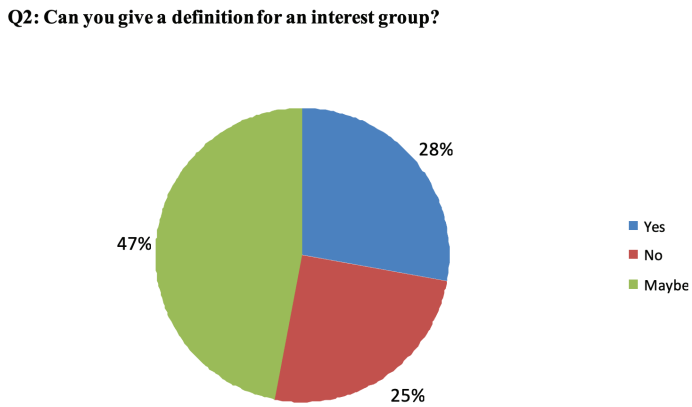


Figure 2: Question 2 of the survey in the Municipality of Chair

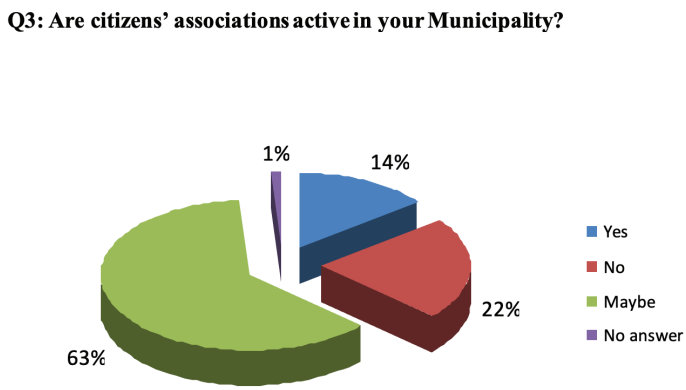


Figure 3: Question 3 of the survey

Fourteen percent of the respondents who provided a positive response were residents of the Municipality of Karpoš.

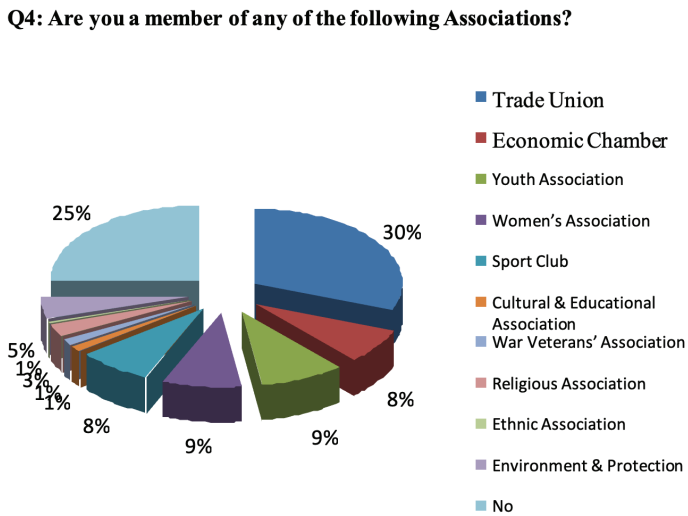


Figure 4: Question 4 of the survey

The pie chart presents data on individuals' membership in different types of associations. The results show a clear hierarchy in association engagement, indicating varying levels of participation across social, economic, and civic organizations. The largest share of respondents, 30%, reported being members of a Trade Union. This suggests that organized labor remains a central and influential structure for collective representation. Such high union membership may reflect a strong formal employment sector, labor rights awareness, or historical traditions of collective bargaining. The second largest group, comprising 25% of respondents, indicated no membership in any association. This figure is significant, pointing to potential disengagement from civic and collective life or barriers to participation such as lack of awareness, interest, or access. The contrast between trade union engagement and overall non-membership highlights the dual nature of social involvement—strong in specific institutional contexts, but limited in broader civil society participation.

Two associations—Youth Associations (9%) and Women's Associations (9%)—follow as moderately represented categories. Their near-equal shares suggest parallel structures of engagement, possibly reflecting gender and age-related mobilization. Such organizations may play crucial roles in fostering social development, empowerment, and community activism among younger demographics and women.

Similarly, Economic Chamber membership (8%) and Sport Club membership (8%) represent comparable participation levels. These figures imply that while economic

and recreational associations attract some members, their appeal is not as broad as that of trade unions. Economic Chambers often require business affiliation, potentially limiting accessibility to general populations.

Membership in other association types—Cultural & Educational (3%), War Veterans' (1%), Religious (1%), Ethnic (1%), and Environment & Protection (5%)—is comparatively low. These results may indicate that such associations cater to more specialized interests or smaller social groups. The relatively low participation in environmental and cultural associations may also reflect limited public awareness or prioritization of these domains in civic engagement.

Overall, the data reveal a concentration of association membership in traditional and structured organizations (notably trade unions), with weaker representation in voluntary and identity-based associations. This trend can be interpreted as evidence of a civic culture that is more institutional than grassroots-oriented.

In summary, while a significant portion of respondents demonstrate engagement through trade unions and selected social organizations, a quarter remain unassociated. This imbalance underscores the need for policies and initiatives aimed at strengthening civic participation, diversifying membership opportunities, and promoting inclusive engagement across environmental, cultural, and educational associations.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

According the phone survey and the data found in the web sites of the Municipality of Karposh and Chair, it is concluded that in the municipality of Chair citizens are beginning to identify the decentralized areas that have 'tangible impact on their everyday lives'. In the Chair Municipality, there is not too many data on the official web site. Because of the small territory and high density, there is a lack of offices for citizens' associations. Furthermore, there is an institutional weakness and low implementation capacity, which limits the voice and participation of citizens. The citizens still are not aware that they can be crucial in decision making and public policy processes, but they still think that someone else should decide on their behalf. In the municipality of Chair International Organizations continually contribute with projects, as municipality's partners. They are: USAID, UNDP, NDI, Word Bank and European Agency for Reconstruction. Recently the USAID office stopped with the projects.

In the Municipality of Karposh there are 40 registered NGO-s and Citizens' Associations that cooperate with the municipality. There are often public debates, and the citizens can be informed in advance through the municipality's web site. There is a special unit assigned to work with citizens and the municipality financially supports the associations. The citizens are very active and aware of their duties and responsibilities. It has a Certificate of Approval for Quality Management System ISO 9001:2008 and this Municipality should be used as a model for other municipalities in the country.

Thus, the empirical findings reveal a considerable gap between institutional frameworks and their effective implementation, resulting in limited civic engagement and a weakened interface between citizens and local authorities. Such deficiencies not only constrain participatory governance but also undermine the fundamental principles of the rule of law and equal access to justice. Addressing these shortcomings requires strengthening institutional capacities, enhancing transparency, and fostering a culture of civic responsibility and trust in public institutions. Furthermore, the active involvement of nongovernmental and international organizations demonstrates the potential for collaborative approaches to reinforce democratic practices and promote more inclusive decision-making processes. Ensuring that citizens' voices are meaningfully integrated into policy development remains a crucial prerequisite for consolidating democratic governance in North Macedonia.

As this research was done with the citizens living in just two municipalities of Skopje another study should be carried out on the influence of citizens' associations on decision-making, involving the inhabitants living in other municipalities in the City of Skopje and wider in North Macedonia and a bigger sample should be used. The author hopes in future to continue with the research and do a survey with youth associations; especially with students studying in State and Private Universities in North Macedonia since recently the youth is not involved in these activities, while in other European countries and in the USA the students shape the public policy.

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