

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AS A CHALLENGE FOR BULGARIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

There are various forms of participation of citizens and social groups in the political process. While political engagement is a more narrow term that refers to direct participation in formal city governance and administration, civic engagement is a broad term that implies being an active citizen in any way in service to the community. According to Dan Jasper “the term civic engagement doesn’t have a standard definition and it could be applied to a range of activities” (Jasper). Civic engagement conventionally refers to activities by the citizens that are intended to influence in the society. The main purpose of the study is the current challenges to civic engagement of Bulgarian citizens to be analyzed. The applied methodology is a combination of a theoretical approach to civic engagement and analysis of the data gathered from various quantitative surveys (European Social Survey, other representative and non-representative sociological surveys) for the period 2018-2022. The data reveal the relatively low civic activity of Bulgarian citizens. According to the results of the Chi-square analysis, education has an impact on the participation of Bulgarian citizens in the various forms of civic activity studied. Given the fact that the younger part of the population has a better educational structure, it can be assumed that it is mostly young people who take part in the various types of civic engagement. However, among young Bulgarians there are apathetic attitudes towards the political processes. The civic engagement of Bulgarian youth is a main challenge for the Bulgarian state and society. The need for political socialization is particularly obvious, and so is the need for specific policies encouraging the promotion of civic engagement.

Keywords: Democracy, Political Participation, Political Engagement, Civic Engagement, Civic participation, Education, Bulgaria

1. Introduction

1.1. Political Participation in the Vibrant Democracies: Political participation is an extremely important factor for liberal democracy. It is no coincidence that theorists of democracy from Aristotle to Bryce have emphasized that “the democracies are supported by active civic participation in civil affairs, a high level of awareness of public affairs and a widespread sense of civic responsibility” (Almond & Verba, 1998). According to Robert Longley “the health of a democratic nation’s government is often measured by how actively its citizens participate in politics” (Longley, 2021). Jan W. van Deth (2016) summarizes that “the extent and scope of political participation are important – perhaps even decisive – criteria for assessing the quality of democracy” (Van Deth, 2016).

Political participation has been defined from different perspectives. One of the common definitions of political participation is given by the French political scientist Pascal Perino, who sees this participation as “a certain homogeneous set of activities through which the mass of citizens come into contact with the specific world of power” (Karasimeonov, 1997). Based on the various studies and understandings of political participation, it can be loosely defined as citizens’ activities and actions affecting (either directly or indirectly) politics and politicians.

Different forms of political participation can be distinguished. Voting is the most common and obvious form of political participation, but “there are a wide variety of ways for citizens to have their voices heard outside of election season” (Nyman, 2021). Robert Longley emphasizes that “Besides voting, political

participation may include activities such as working on campaigns, donating money to candidates or causes, contacting public officials, petitioning, and protesting” (Longley, 2021). The list of activities, however, is not exhaustive. Jan W. van Deth (2016) emphasizes that this list has become virtually infinite. It includes actions such as “voting, demonstrating, contacting public officials, boycotting, attending party rallies, guerrilla gardening, posting blogs, volunteering, joining flash mobs, signing petitions, buying fair-trade products, and even suicide protests” (Van Deth, 2016). This fact is directly related to the precise definition of political participation.

According to Jan W. van Deth (2016) eight rules can be applied to define political participation. They are based on the answers to eight questions respectively. The rules are arranged as follows (Van Deth, 2016):

- Rule 1: “Is it an activity or action?”.
- Rule 2: “Is the activity voluntary?”.
- Rule 3: “Is the activity conducted by nonprofessionals?”.
- Rule 4: “Is the activity located in the sphere of government/state/politics?”.
- Rule 5: “Is the activity targeted at the sphere of government/state/politics?”.
- Rule 6: “Is the activity aimed at solving collective or community problems?”.
- Rule 7: “Is the activity placed in a political context?”.
- Rule 8: “Is the activity used to express political aims and intentions?”.

The author is developed and “A conceptual map of political participation” (Van Deth, 2016). This map presents very clearly the nature of political participation (Figure 1). However, the in-depth analysis of political participation also implies the distinction of its varieties.

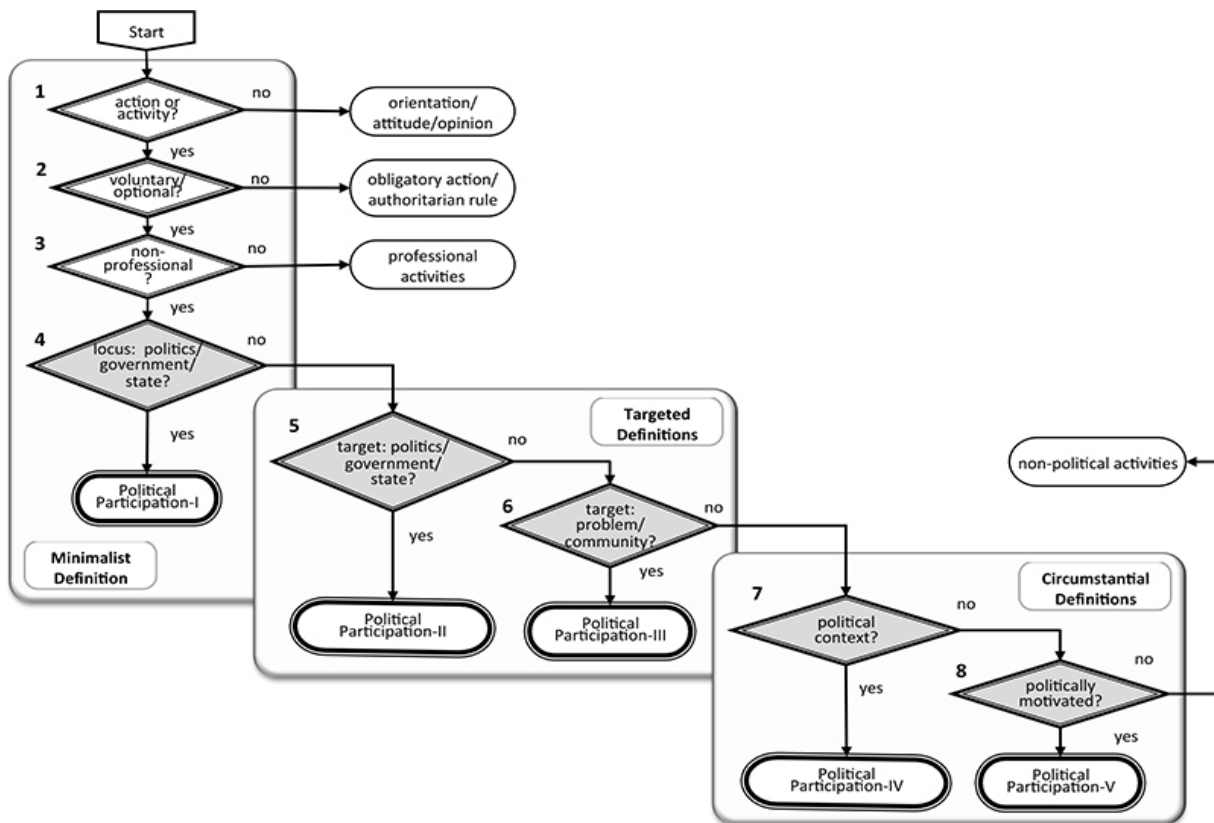


Figure 1. A conceptual map of political participation (Van Deth, 2016).

According to Georgi Karasimeonov (1997) three main types of political participation in representative democracies can be identified: passive participation, active participation and apathy or distance from the political process, or political non-participation as a result of voluntary choice. Voting can be defined as passive or representative (electoral) political participation and the other forms of activities – as non-representative and direct participation. In my opinion, the apathy or distance from the political process should also be considered as a form of participation in the politics – as tacit political participation in terms of understanding that political inaction has the character of political action (Stoykova, 2021). From this perspective, political participation can be defined as a civic duty and a panacea for the crisis of representative democracy.

According to Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå (2012) the literature on political participation is in need of theoretical development. The authors summarize that the distinction between manifest and latent (civil participation) forms of political participation “is crucial, if we want to understand new forms of political behaviour and the prospects for political participation in different countries” (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). The concepts of political participation, political engagement, civic participation and civic engagement must be clearly defined.

1.2. Political Engagement versus Civic Engagement: Political engagement can be defined as “participation of citizens in selecting and sanctioning the leaders who wield power in government, including by entering themselves as contenders for leadership. Political engagement includes citizen actions as voters, as actual and potential challengers for leadership positions in government, and in organized groups that pressure elected politicians and appointed public officials through civil society action and public protests” (Making Politics Work for Development. Harnessing transparency and citizen engagement (Conference edition), 2016).

The following distinction between political engagement and civic engagement can be found on the UBCM website: while political engagement is a more narrow term that refers to direct participation in formal city governance and administration, civic engagement is a broad term that implies being an active citizen in any way in service to the community (Youth Engagement Programs and Best Practices, 2012). It is important to emphasize that the goal of civic engagement is to create and maintain a better community. Robert Longley (2022) shares the following definition of civic engagement: “Civic engagement means participating in activities intended to improve the quality of life in one’s community by addressing issues of public concern, such as homelessness, pollution, or food insecurity, and developing the knowledge and skills needed to address those issues. Civic engagement can involve a wide range of political and non-political activities including voting, volunteering, and participating in group activities like community gardens and food banks” (Longley, 2022).

Many types of political participation can be listed (Youth Engagement Programs and Best Practices, 2012): “participating in community and volunteer organizations; participating in elections by volunteering or voting; writing letters to political representatives; campaigning in various issues through social media; membership in associations and groups; rallying and protesting; signing petitions; engagement with local government politics; sitting on city councils, regional boards, Advisory Committees, Task Forces, boards; making presentations to the council”. The rapid development of digital information and communication technologies makes it possible to include new forms of political activity (activities such as posting comments, opinions, information or audiovisual materials on websites, blogs and other).

The various types of civic engagement (Figure 2) are described by the Center for Civic Engagement at the Illinois State University Types of Civic Engagement (Center for Civic Engagement, Illinois State University). The researchers share the following definition of civic engagement, which can be found in Civic Responsibility and Higher Education, edited by Thomas Ehrlich: “Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values

and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (Ehrlich, 2000).

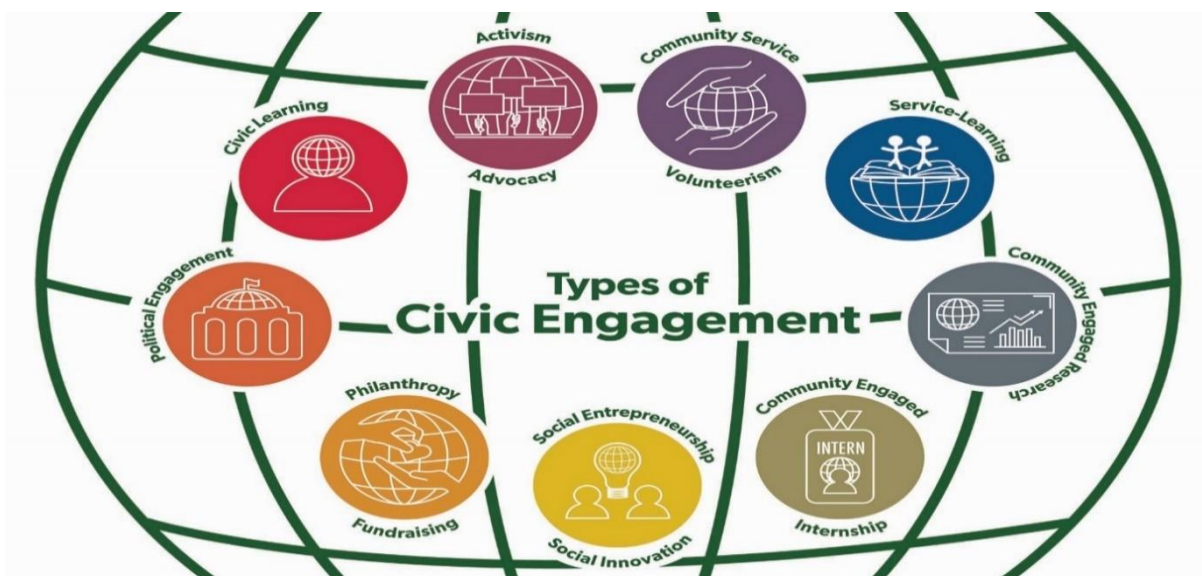


Figure 2. Types of Civic Engagement (Center for Civic Engagement, Illinois State University).

Some authors share the opinion that the civic engagement is multidimensional and includes knowledge, skills, values, motivation and civic identity (Van Camp & Baugh, 2016). It is a serious challenge to the development of democracy. The researchers from the the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life lists the following five obstacles to civic engagement (Civic Engagement, The policy circle):

- “Lack of Civility – For many citizens, politics is seen as hostile territory, and lack of open, reasoned discussion and debate alienates public participation and dialogue.
- Lack of Attention to Public Affairs – Trust in news sources is on the decline. Many citizens are unsure of where to go for information, leaving them less likely to be informed about a wide range of perspectives, and even less likely to be engaged.
- Lack of Role Models – “Citizens are made, not born,” but with fewer discussions about public affairs and fewer politicians exemplifying leadership and devotion to public service, there are fewer opportunities for a civic-minded population.
- Lack of Civic and Political Skills – Communication, networking, and even running for public office are processes and skills can help engaged citizens make communities better places to live.
- Lack of Awareness – The combined forces of “incivility, misinformation, and the active marketing of cynicism” have left many citizens disillusioned and unmotivated to engage in their communities” (Civic Engagement, The policy circle).

Civic engagement is a main characteristic and prerequisite for the prosperity of all communities. Kip Holley emphasizes that “the civic engagement is the tool that people tend to interact with policymakers and others with the power to act on the communities directly” (Holley, 2016). However, we have to agree with the GovOS team that “not all communities have the same level of engagement” (Civic Engagement for Local Government, 2021). Furthermore, the researchers concluded that “the communities with higher levels of participation have higher standards of living and face fewer difficult issues requiring complex problem solving” (Civic Engagement for Local Government, 2021). All citizens must develop their leadership and civic identities in order to facilitate positive change in local, national and global communities.

1.3. *Citizen Engagement versus Citizen Participation*: Political engagement is defined as a particular subset of civic engagement (Ehrlich, 2000). The term civic engagement, however, can easily be replaced by the following terms: civic participation, civic action, civic activities, civic initiatives, civic commitment or duty, civic responsibility and civic life. According to the concept of four constructs of civic engagement (Civic Engagement) it can be concluded that civic engagement is the broadest term of the listed (Figure 3).

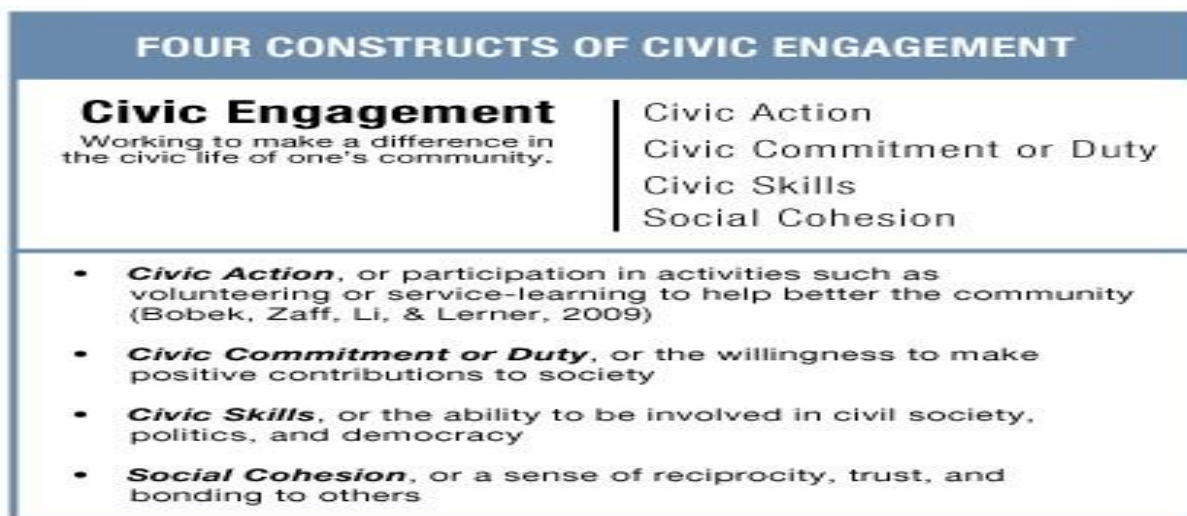


Figure 3: Four constructs of Civic Engagement (Civic Engagement, <https://youth.gov/>)

In some studies, however, the terms civic engagement and civic participation are analyzed in depth. It is meant that citizen engagement is not entirely the same as citizen participation. According to Ilona Lodewijckx “Both concepts might seem similar, but they have differing views of the role that citizens should play” (Lodewijckx, 2020). She notes that “The key difference between participation and engagement is that citizen engagement requires an active, intentional dialogue between citizens and public decision makers whereas citizen participation can come from citizens only” (Lodewijckx, 2020). It should be emphasized that citizen engagement and participation have the same goal: improving public service deliveries and policy projects (Lodewijckx, 2020). The differences between the both concepts help us from a methodological point of view (Figure 4). In a sense, however, they can be used as synonyms. It should be emphasized that at the core of both concepts is the active citizenship.

2. Methods

Data from the following quantitative surveys are used to analyze the civic engagement of Bulgarian citizens in the period 2018-2022: 1) European Social Survey (ESS) – Round 9 (2018) and Round 10 (2020); 2) A national representative sociological survey of Bulgarian young people aged 14–29 (2018). The survey was organised, methodologically developed and funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation; 3) Unrepresentative quantitative survey on “Rural life and the challenges for the young people” (2019). It was carried out within the project “We, the young people, can” by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the NGO “Because we can”. The survey was conducted among the young people aged 15 to 29 whose permanent residence is one of the villages in the municipalities of Petrich and Sandanski. The sample size is 98 people. As a sociologist under this project, I processed the data with the SPSS program; 4) Civic Health Index Bulgaria 2021. It is a sociological survey developed by Sofia Platform Foundation as part of the Civic Europe program. The application of the Index is the work of Global Metrics – an agency for marketing and sociological research and analysis (Civic Health Index Bulgaria) and 5) A national representative survey of Bulgarian young

people aged 15–29 (2022). The survey was conducted by “Gallup International Balkan” on behalf of the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

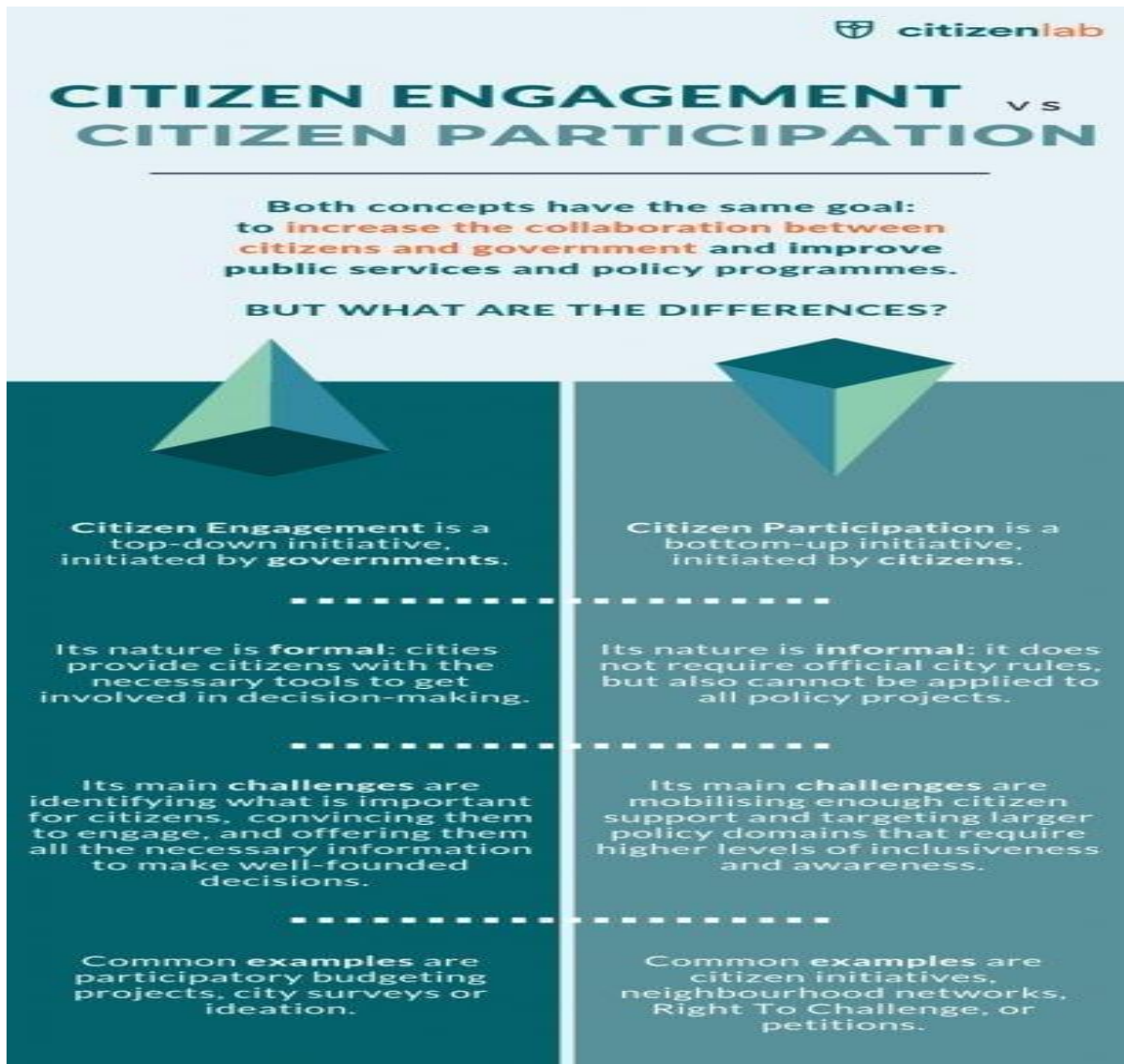


Figure 4: Citizen Engagement vs Citizen Participation (Lodewijckx, 2020)

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of civic engagement of Bulgarian citizens is based on data from European Social Survey (ESS) – Round 9 (2018) and Round 10 (2020). It should be emphasized that in Round 10 (2020) various civic engagement activities are included (European Social Survey).

Some types of civic activities are explored in the ESS9 (2018). The data reveal the relatively low civic activity of Bulgarian citizens. Concerning each of the following indicators: Contacted a politician or government official last 12 months; Worked in a political party or action group last 12 months; Worked in another organization or association last 12 months; Signed a petition last 12 months; Taken part in a lawful public demonstration last 12 months; Boycotted certain products last 12 months: and Posted or shared anything about politics online last 12 months, the share of Bulgarian respondents who answered “yes” is

significantly smaller than the corresponding total share of all respondents from the 29 countries included in the survey (Figure 5).

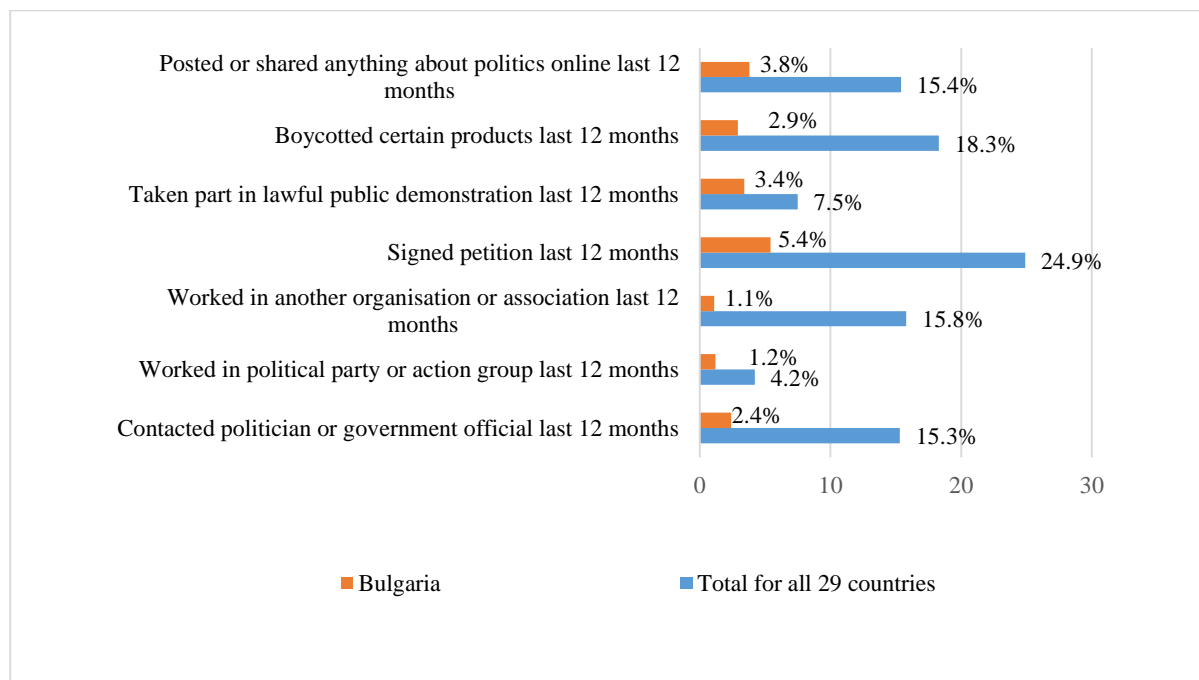


Figure 5. Types of civic activities 2018 (ESS9)

According to the results of the Chi-square analysis, education has an impact on the participation of Bulgarian citizens in the various forms of civic activity studied. Although the Cramer’s coefficient with respect to the indicators listed above is respectively: 0,143; 0,105; 0,104; 0,113; 0,091; 0,105 and 0,114 (i.e. the dependence between education and the different indicators is weak), education is an important prerequisite for the formation of higher civic engagement. No doubt, the highest civic participation is observed among the higher educated population (Stoykova, 2021).

In the period from 2018 to 2020, the civic activity of Bulgarian citizens is increasing. The following indicators are used in the questionnaire of ESS10 (2020): Contacted politician or government official last 12 months; Donated to or participated in political party or pressure group last 12 months; Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker last 12 months; Signed petition last 12 months; Taken part in public demonstration last 12 months; Boycotted certain products last 12 months; Posted or shared anything about politics online last 12 months. The share of Bulgarian respondents who answered “yes” to the more questions is smaller than the average for the 22 countries surveyed (Figure 6). The percentages are the same in only one of the cases (“Taken part in public demonstration last 12 months”).

Through Chi-square analysis, the meaning of education on the different forms of civic participation was verified. The values of the Cramer’s coefficient showing the influence of education on the studied civic activities, in the order of their enumeration on Figure 6, are as follows: 0,148; 0,091; 0,086; 0,183; 0,170; 0,146 and 0,181. Similar to the results of ESS9 the dependence between education and each of the indicators is weak. The conclusion is confirmed, that civic engagement is higher among citizens who have completed a higher degree of education.

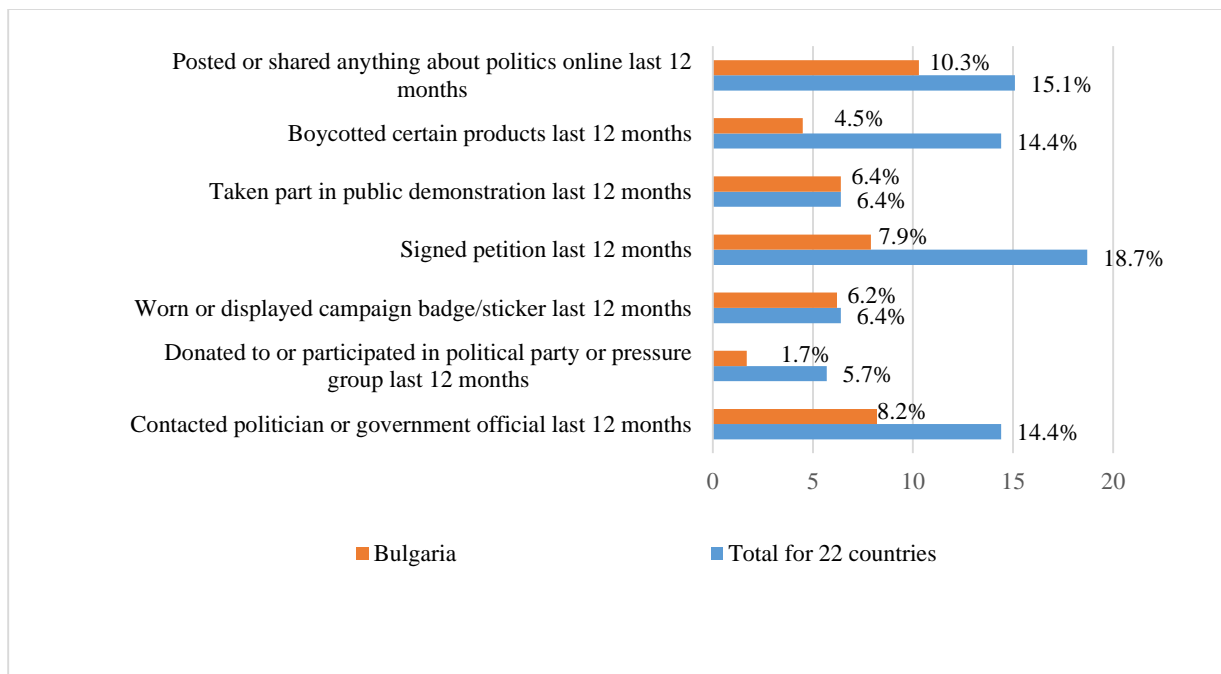


Figure 6. Types of civic activities 2020 (ESS10)

In 2018, a national representative sociological survey of Bulgarian youth (people aged 14–29) has conducted. The research is organised, methodologically developed and funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The main conclusions of the research in the political sphere for young people are framed by a triad: a low interest in politics (7 percent are interested in politics as a whole), a low level of political participation, and a low level of motivation for a political career (Youth Study Bulgaria 2018/2019). Political alienation is a serious challenge for young Bulgarians.

Conventional political participation (party membership, etc.) is greatly discredited and the need for measures to systematically involve young people in the process of making, advising and evaluating policy decisions in institutions is becoming increasingly evident (Youth Study Bulgaria 2018/2019). Regarding to the other political activities, the studied forms of political participation are the following: Supporting a petition or an appeal; Taking part in a demonstration; Getting involved in voluntary or civil activities; Working for a political party; Boycotting goods due to ecological problems and Online political participation. The answers indicate that they are all concentrated in a small segment of respondents, rarely exceeding one-tenth (Youth Study Bulgaria 2018/2019).

The results of an unrepresentative quantitative survey on “Rural life and the challenges for young people”, conducted in the period from 01 December 2019 to 22 December 2019 among 98 young people, aged 15 to 29 with permanent residence in some of the villages in the municipalities of Petrich and Sandanski (Bulgaria), also reveal many disturbing tendencies related to the interest of young people in politics and their political socialization.

According to the surveyed young people, the mayor of the municipality, the mayor of the village and the inhabitants of the village bear the greatest responsibility for the quality of life in their village (Figure 7). The frequent indication of the villagers’ responsibility by the respondents means that civic activity can also be expected from these young people.

An alarming fact is emerging, when asked “Who is most responsible for the quality of life in your village?”, more than half of the respondents (61,9%) indicated the option “I have no opinion” (in the municipality of Sandanski this answer was chosen by 88,2% of the surveyed persons, and in the municipality of Petrich by

47,6%). These data suggest the need to increase the political and legal culture of rural youth, and hence their civic activity.

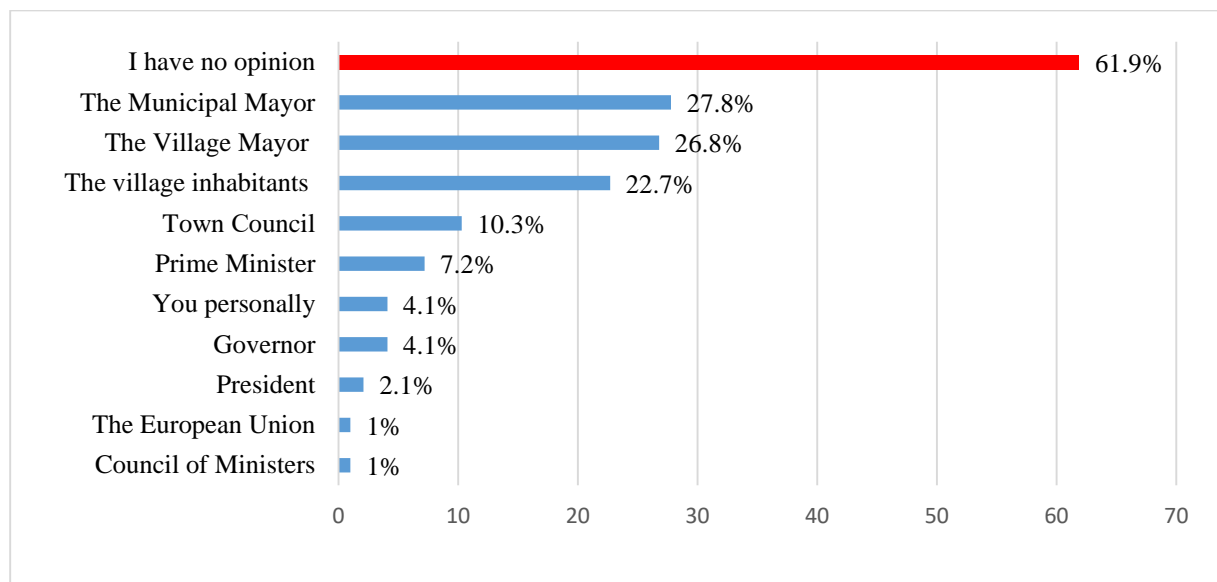


Figure 7. Who is most responsible for the quality of life in your village?

In 2022, a national representative survey of Bulgarian young people aged 15–29 was conducted by “Gallup International Balkan” (face-to-face survey among 1008 young people). The data show that “the involvement of young people in various activities and organizations continues to be rather rare” (An important survey for young people in Bulgaria, 2023).

The low civic activity of Bulgarian citizens in general and the existence of foundations for its development are also confirmed by the Civil Health Index (It is a sociological survey by the Sofia Platform Foundation, inspired by the Civic Health Index initiative of the American organization National Conference on Citizenship). The application of the Index in 2021 is done by the sociological agency Global Metrics and it is supported by the [Civic Europe](#) programme, implemented by the Sofia Platform Foundation in partnership with MitOst e.V. and supported by the Stiftung Mercator. The results show that there are good foundations in Bulgaria for civic participation arising from the relatively good legal framework, but still real practices and real civic activity are at a very low level. The index outlines a very weak readiness, but also a weak desire to participate in any to be organized forms of civil activity (Civic Health Index Bulgaria). The “civic health”, defined as “the current set of components of civic participation and the conditions that enable or impede it”, can be considered as a main challenge for Bulgarian representative democracy.

4. Conclusions

Political participation is vital for a healthy democracy. Civic participation itself is a fundamental principle of democracy. Vibrant democracies are characterized by a continuous expansion of the available forms of participation (Nyman, 2021). The local governments need to provide the tools and opportunities for civic engagement and civic participation. Citizen participation “leads to higher levels of trust, stronger, happier communities, and creates agency among residents who are often overlooked and underheard” (What is civic participation?). Special attention should be paid to the civic knowledge and engagement of young people.

There is potential for increasing civic activity in Bulgarian society. Education is a prerequisite for the civic engagement of Bulgarian citizens. The collapse in interest in politics is a phenomenon with long-term consequences for the political socialization of young people as well as for the political future of the country

(Youth Study Bulgaria 2018/2019). Reform of the educational system related to increasing the knowledge of schoolchildren and students on political and social issues, is becoming more and more necessary. Challenges for the Bulgarian youth are the understanding of the basic concepts of citizenship and the development of their civic identity.

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