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**“Standby Youth?”: The Patterns of  
Youth Political Participation in  
Bosnia and Herzegovina during  
Covid-19 Pandemic**

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**CENTER FOR  
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## Abstract

Approaches explaining the dynamics of youth crisis participation coincide with the binary nature **of political engagement among youth, thus solely examining young's activity in light of the** general understanding of political participation as a cornerstone democratic right. What remains unknown in this constellation is the extent of reaction and the reasons behind such responses. This is why this qualitative study aims to investigate the causes of youth engagement in Covid-19 related protests and how it developed in response to government action. It does so through a series of twenty interviews conducted across BiH in the first six months of 2021. The primary focus is on two activities - protest for social cause and expression of opinion. The findings reveal that the action-reaction patterns were not independent occurrences, but evolved through three different stages each of which was marked by specific traits and depended on distinctive causes. The article points to a novel dimension of youth participation - the importance of the **'ordinariness' and the response as pushed by 'standby citizens' with a turnout which points that** the country is dealing with a new generation of politically active citizens.

## Keywords

political participation, youth participation, crisis participation, Covid-19 pandemic, standby citizens, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## Introduction

A complex and problematized issue in scholarly literature, youth political participation represents a binary subject – the young people are viewed as either the heralds of apolitical behavior instigating a democratic crisis (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007) or forbearers of new forms of political engagement, such as digital **participation and other ‘realms’ of electronic presence (Coleman, 2006)**. Both paradigms, however, suggest that the repertoires of youth political participation are **evolving (Amnå and Ekman, 2014; Barret and Zani, 2015) pointing to the fact that youth’s** engagement in politics has long ceased to be fit for contextualization within simply formal or informal domains. The dilemmas relating to the levels of youth participation acutely impose themselves, especially during a time of crisis, from socio-economic internal struggles within states to conflict, but also global challenges such as environmental and health threats. Indeed, any **challenges to “normal” or merely the status quo alter participation patterns and support to** democratic institutions, making political engagement insecure, but integral to the understanding **of youth’s response to crisis distress. As Kornberg and Clarke (1992) argue, citizens are capable of** extenuating the effects of political challenges in such times whilst participation allows them to be more active and responsive. Yet, what varies in times of crisis is that the function of reaction changes; in fact, it takes on a proactive form since it is a response to an emergency, a challenge, or a hardship that is characterized by protest (Grasso and Giugni, 2016; Ekman, Gherghina and Podolian, 2016; Memoli, 2016).

Despite being sparse, research on political participation during times of crisis has largely remained focused on the role of volunteer networks and social media engagement within the informal realm and organizations in the sphere of formal political participation (Guo et al., 2020; Vilenchik and Literat, 2020; Chen et al., 2018; Waldman et al., 2018). Moreover, studies explaining the dynamics of youth political participation coincide with the binary nature of its practice among youth, thus solely examining **young’s activity or inactivity in light of the general understanding of** political participation as a cornerstone right in a democratic society. Such broad interpretations fall short of understanding the extent of the political reaction and the triggers behind it. Yet, some **citizens might appear passive or on a political standby. Such ‘standby’ citizens are prepared for** political action in circumstances that **call for a reaction, they “keep themselves informed about** politics by bringing up political issues in everyday life contexts, and are willing and able to **participate if needed” (Amnå and Ekman 2014, p. 262)**. Thus, what occurs in situations in which **‘standby’ citizens or, in this case, youth, decide to engage and what forms this process goes**

through, has been mostly dismissed in the superfluity of scholarly works on youth political engagement.

What is more, previous research has failed to address youth political participation during a crisis. In this constellation, research on youth engagement in politics, both informal and formal, has mostly focused on the means of participation (Literat et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2016; Dzula et al., 2020) and conditions which articulate political response, such as socio-economic standing or structural opportunities (Literat et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2016; Boulianne et al., 2020). Congruently and due to the continuous frame working of the act of political engagement, the focus has been either on active youth participants or disengaged youth, but little is known about the triggers (what may instigate youth participation) and the extent of the reactions (how triggers shape long-term political engagement). As Malafaia et al. (2021) point, research which focuses on **how “standby citizens” (Amnå and Ekman, 2014) relate to politics “enables discrediting simplistic deficit approaches by recognizing that contemporary youth understand, define and live politics in new and diverse ways” (Malafaia et al., 2021, p. 439). This stream from ‘disengaged youth or engaged youth’ to youth as ‘standby citizens’ who are ready for political action if the context warrants it, has not been documented extensively, apart from a recent study by Malafaia et al. (2021) and conceptual considerations of various types of activism alongside three considerations of “passive citizenship” by Amnå and Ekman (2014). Both studies provide solid accounts for the theoretical and empiric implications of existing forms of youth political engagement, which is relevant inasmuch as they help in understanding youth political action and the circumstances, actions, and reactions which surround the former. Yet, to understand this interaction between the circumstances (contextualization) and triggers for participation among ‘youth ready for reaction’ has been left out research in contexts in which youth has been problematized to show declining levels of civic engagement such as in Eastern and Southeastern Europe (Kovacheva, 2005) sometimes despite alternative possibilities to involve citizens in the decision-making process (Gherghina, Ekman and Podolian, 2019).**

To that end, this work is interested in exploring the extent of proactive reaction and reasons for such responses among youth during times of crisis. More specifically, the departing point for this work is youth engagement in informal participation during the Covid-19 pandemic and the three-step path which symbolized varying forms of youth response to government-induced policies, the practices they engaged in, and triggers which instigated their responses. The work is especially interested in how participation developed during different periods of the

pandemic and evolved from full support for the government to political mistrust and skepticism. Drawing on previous scholarly work on forms of political participation (Theocaris and van Deth, 2016; Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013), the primary focus is on two activities – expression of opinion and attempt to influence political decisions by promoting various forms of social norms, particularly the right to the freedom of movement and freedom of choice in response to imposed government action. Considering that the political experiences of youth who can be termed as **'standby' differ from those who are considered highly active or apathetic, understanding their** political actions in ways that not only speak of the levels but also trigger factors behind them and during a period of crisis, is a gap of knowledge that this work will try to address. The article fills the empirical void by presenting a case study of young people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus **explaining the element of 'learning from politics' during** a crisis and how that shapes the reasons behind crisis political engagement (the extent of actions and reactions). This was done through twenty interviews with youth aged 18-25 which discussed forms of political participation during the crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants engaged in the research process commented both on the extent of their actions and reactions cajoled by government-imposed stringent policies aimed at slowing the pandemic. The primary focus is on two activities that emerged during the research – protest for social cause and expression of opinion. The findings reveal that the action-reaction patterns were not independent occurrences, but evolved through three different stages (paths) each of which was marked by specific traits and depended on different causes. The findings presented here will allow for a discussion on how the young articulate their individual voices to politically mobilize during times of crisis and their vision about politics and governments. The article points to a novel dimension of youth participation, that which does not correspond to one of the two ends of political participation – conventional or unconventional, but rather **points to the importance of the 'ordinariness' (Harris et al., 2010) and the response as needed by 'standby citizens' (Amnå and Ekman, 2014) with a turnout which,** surprisingly, points that the country is dealing with a new generation of politically active citizens.

The rest of the article breaks down as follows. The first section offers a brief literature review with a focus on youth political participation, but not in ways in which political participation is an overarching process that is **'everything and nothing', but engagement during crisis. As such,** it departs from a theoretical basis which posits the case study against the understanding that young citizens may appear passive, but are in fact on a political standby, ready to act and react in circumstances which spur their attention. The second section discusses the methodological

choices, including data gathering and analysis. The third section presents the results of the analysis, while the fourth and final part represents a set of concluding remarks and a general discussion about the implications for further research, based on the presented findings.

### Youth and Crisis Political Engagement

Most of the available research on youth political engagement is classified along the lines of the either-or paradigm, implicating that youth either actively participate or do not participate in politics at all. More recent scholarship, however, points to a transformational way of youth **political engagement, reporting a paradigm shift from ‘disengaged’ and ‘disillusioned’ to ‘engaged citizenship (Dalton, 2008) or ‘standby citizen’ approach (Amnå and Ekman, 2014).** These works largely point to the fact that claims about the erosion of political participation among youth can be dismissed, simply because youth have developed a different approach to understanding how politics works and what channels of participation are available. An adult-centric attitude towards politics simply does not work with youth. Instead, what must be considered in order to understand youth political participation is the learning process about politics that serves as a background to their political actions and the extent of subsequent reactions.

Turning to crisis political participation, such an adult-centric understanding of politics and its processes largely dismisses youth from the very progression of political engagement. This is **simply because the ‘disengaged’ and ‘disillusioned’ paradigm does not align with the modes in which youth engages in crisis participation.** As Bang (2005) argues, youth have developed new forms of political participation, hence to dismiss them from politics altogether would indicate a serious obscuration of understanding political engagement forms in its entirety. Such new forms take many shapes and go beyond the scope of this article, but during times of crisis, they evolve to include protests and attempts to instigate political responses by influencing politicians, mostly through social networks, to change their crisis-management approach. The latter, as data gathered through this research points, does not always take the form of kind letters or petitions, but is sometimes marked by harsh-worded criticism that may extend as far as publicly propagating an anti-public figure effort on social networks. Thus, we cannot discredit youth’s political participation but may suggest that, although not in traditional ways, youth still engages with and keeps informed about politics. And although, youth political participation in such forms **may appear unspectacular, this ‘middle ground’ approach of standby citizens is essential if we want to fully understand the paradigm that youth is not always representative of ‘future leaders’**

or **'plain troublemakers'**, but that the **'excluded middle'** (Nairn et al., 2006) also leaves an empirical mark on understanding why and how youth engages in political processes.

Relating this approach to youth crisis participation, the argument in this work is not posited against the background that youth engage only because they are angry with government approaches, but that they are both informed about the outcomes of political decisions and that their triggers are not hostile. Hence, youth is not on standby because they are waiting for a bad political decision that targets them only, they do not have a pre-existing hostility towards politics, but simply use a crisis situation which affects society to instigate political responses from peers, family, and politicians (Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005; Amnå and Ekman, 2014). Even before the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, youth political engagement was marked by crisis events – human rights struggles, freedom of speech, environmental challenges and access to education sparked youth political responses globally. In such instances, youth participation was based on them being informed about politics surrounding these issues and not on general feelings of apathy or hostility towards politics. Hence, youth political participation during Covid-19 is just an extension of previous actions and reactions which prove that politics among youth is alive and at the center of their attention, just not equally and all at the same time for everybody. Here, the essentiality of political knowledge (Dalton, 2008), and the focus on learning about politics in an interactive way (Ferreira et al., 2012) are crucial for understanding youth political participation. Quintelier (2015) points to the role of so-called **'political agents'**, such as **peers, family**, and schools, in understanding the general patterns of youth political engagement. During a crisis, information-based political knowledge, awareness about participation channels of influence, and individual feeling about the implications and importance of government actions are thus essential in defining the extent of youth actions and reactions.

It is within this continuum that this qualitative work aims to posit itself. The divergences **from 'disillusioned' to just youth on a 'standby' that occurred under crisis are manifested in the** twenty interviews with youth from across Bosnia and Herzegovina. All of them engaged in protests and/or attempts to influence politicians/political decisions. For the young whose words and thoughts are cited below, political participation during the Covid-19 crisis was a moment of warranted attention. This instant pulled them towards political engagement, although not always in forms and ways in which a traditional, adult-centric understanding of politics and its processes emphasizes political involvement. Instead, their actions were not spurred by anti-

political sentiment but represented a by-product of learning about politics and a knowledgeable reaction to the crisis.

### Methodology and Data

**‘Standby citizen’ or as Schudson (1996, 1998) terms them ‘monitorial citizens’, which was briefly** discussed above, has led to a reframing of the typical black-and-white conceptualization of political participation, whereby the main claim made is that citizens are not politically phlegmatic, even in cases in which they do **not participate. Instead, they ‘monitor’ it and react in moments** critical for their understanding of politics. In this work, the political engagement of youth is posited precisely against this background – political participation is not envisioned as a mere obligation and an act of impassivity if it does not occur alongside the typical political participation continuum. Instead, the understanding of the political participation of youth is explored through the lens proposed by Schudson (1996, 1998) and alternatively also Rosanvallon (2008) through in-depth interviews, which help postulate youth political engagement during a crisis period. As Beck (2001) proposes, in order to assess the politics of the young, a switch from quantitative analysis of the levels of the **young’s participation to a qualitative understanding of youth political intent** is needed. Alternatively, such a methodological approach sheds light on the multi-dimensional and fluctuating forms of political engagement of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Covid-19 crisis, which, as it will be shown, depends on factors such as family influence, individual understanding of the crisis and the austerity of government measures. Here, data is drawn from multi-sited research conducted from January to June 2021 in seven cities/towns across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Interviews were conducted with youth from four urban and three semi-urban areas. In approaching the participants, a snowball method sampling was used, mainly for accessing participants outside of Sarajevo. Since personal experiences of Covid-19 trauma, family and peer pressure, as well as emotions were discussed; snowballing method provided the best approach for maintaining the level with the participants since initially, they were difficult to recruit. Three main criteria were outlined in the participant selection procedure: (1) open engagement in online or street campaigns against government-imposed measures and/or (2) attempts to address government officials for social benefit and (3) previous engagement of only voting/or no voting at all but no other forms of political participation.

The words cited in this work represent a portion of data gathered through interviews with twenty youngsters from Bosnia and Herzegovina aged 18-25. In-depth face-to-face interviews took place in Sarajevo and Zenica, while online interviews were conducted via Zoom or Microsoft **Teams platforms with participants from Goražde, Konjic, Mostar, Prnjavor**, and Sokolac. The typical length of the interview was one hour, although eight interviews lasted close to 2 hours, and all were conducted in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. All the names mentioned in this work are pseudonyms, while age, city of origin, and form of participation are authentic. The profiles of all the participants are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Profiles of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	City	Interview type
Marko	24	Waiter	Sokolac	Zoom
Rahma	18	High-School student	Sarajevo	In person
Sanjin	22	Pharmacy student	Sarajevo	In person
Mateo	19	Music Academy student/works as a DJ	Mostar	Teams
Irfan	19	Tourist guide	Mostar	Teams
Adian	25	Hotel receptionist	Sarajevo	In person
Ilirija	22	Waitress	Prnjavor	Zoom
Svjetlana	20	Journalism student	Sokolac	Zoom
Hanan	21	Law student	Konjic	Zoom
Dalia	25	Nurse	Zenica	In person
Mona	19	Freelance tourist guide	<b>Goražde</b>	Teams
Mirza	18	Student	<b>Goražde</b>	Teams
Fedja	20	Music Academy Student	Prnjavor	Zoom
Daris	22	German language student	Konjic	Teams
Iman	22	Economics student / Sales assistant	Sarajevo	In person
Vojin	21	Law student / Sales assistant	Zenica	Zoom
<b>Miloš</b>	23	Restaurant owner	Zenica	In person
Gvozden	24	Fitness instructor	Prnjavor	Teams
Mirna	20	Law student	<b>Goražde/Sarajevo</b>	In person
Zarah	23	Waitress	Sokolac	Zoom

The participants come from both entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, notwithstanding the fact that the two entities had different, yet similar responses to Covid-19 crisis management and the ways it impacted youth. While mindful of different political orientations and sensitivities in the perception of crisis, I did not engage in the discussion which related to participants' **different**

ethnic backgrounds, which, in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina may appear important in light of political participation. Instead, the interest is on the extent of action and reaction, or better triggers which influenced youngsters to engage in varying forms of protest and/or attempts to communicate with politicians for a social cause. Through a plethora of personal experiences, this **work sheds light on what Amnå and Ekman (2014) describe as ‘standby citizens’ or ‘monitorial citizens’ in the words of Schudson (1998), which enable us to understand the observational, yet critical form of political engagement since it explains how crisis imbeds itself into personal lives and easily turns into protest or political action for a common social benefit.**

The following section thus explores these personal accounts which are used to explore the concept of crisis political participation among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such an account **informs our understanding of ‘active observers of politics’, but seemingly uninterested and unimportant actors, who, as this research will show, are able to shape policies and influence decision-making.** A qualitative approach, in that regard, not only demonstrates the levels of **political engagement, but the young’s learning and** the rational process behind it – what moves politics and what informs its understanding?

### The Nature of Initial Youth Response

When the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared a national emergency on March 17, 2020, both entities in the country were already in lockdowns (RS from March 10 and FBiH on March 11). The political misalignment between the two entities and the state was already criticized but was soon overshadowed by feelings of fear, disbelief, and growing panic in search of extra food and hygienic items. Since then, the country has witnessed growing pressure from the public, mostly directed towards the responses taken to combat the effects of the pandemic and the growing health concerns in light of the fact that BiH has the second-largest Covid-19 induced death rate in the world. These trajectories spurred growing youth engagement with the local and regional authorities since public policies that became a norm were not justified and had major implications on different levels of society. As a response, the political participation of youth burgeoned mostly in a form of protest and/or attempts to influence political decision-making. However, youth participation did not emerge instantly but instead moved through three phases: the alignment phase, the eccentric phase, and the distrust phase. These paths that emerged among youth and that symbolized the growth of youth crisis participation in BiH will be unpacked through the analysis of trigger factors that influenced participation, the extent of their lasting,

and the implications that are felt almost two years later. As it will be shown, the primary drivers of **political participation are 'irrational' and 'ungrounded' political decisions which influence societal well-being**. Daris (22) is a German language student from a small town of Konjic, where the pandemic showed its first effects on its citizens:

I posed no questions. A local guy whom my father knew and who was infected at a large political gathering here in Konjic, died. I followed the news and things did not look pretty, so **I accepted the 'measures'. I returned home from Sarajevo and stayed at home** with my parents, went outside so they would not be exposed and did everything to protect the family.

Hanan (21) who is also from Konjic explains:

These were not the times when I was in a position to question anything. I absorbed the news from Italy and was just in a complete panic. I fully supported what the government was doing simply because I felt that my family was protected. This is a small town and since it was proclaimed as the epicenter of the virus in BiH, I thought there was no better response.

Initially, these participants did not exhibit any attempts at ordinary acts of political participation. Instead, they absorbed the news, thus learning and informing themselves, but did not question government policies simply because of fear for their families. However, their words indicate a preference for family well-being, **while they position themselves at the forefront of the "battle for everybody's health" as Hanan points. In times of crisis, governments rely on citizen support to help** them in overcoming the crisis-induced burdens (Kornberg and Clarke, 1992). In such instances, all citizens follow the authorities, and in fact, they form a natural alliance in which political participation is reduced to sporadic and only essential responses. Ilirija (22) from a small town of Prnjavor explains:

It was like this – you were insane if you thought that a mandatory curfew was not OK. It seemed like this was the only time that the entire country was on the same page – almost all **were in favor of the 'measures' and felt protected**.

In the alignment phase which marked the initial stage of crisis, the political participation of youth from BiH leaned much on the feelings of safety. In a country that is ethnically fragmented such as **BiH, the uniform responses to the crisis appeared as if, as Vojin (21) puts it, "politicians on all levels were finally doing something right"**. In such instances, political participation was not non-existent but emerged in a form in the unusual form – complete alignment. What is evident, however, is that Daris, Hanan, and Ilirija, were well informed both about the situation at hand, and more so

about government’s reaction. The alignment was just a first and a natural response where triggers for support were based on feelings such as fear, insecurity, and societal and family well-being.

The extent of government-imposed measures, however, soon turned public attention to **the implications of “fast earning” for government institutions as Marko, a 24-year-old waiter from a township of Sokolac puts it:**

I was without a job, practically. The café where I worked was closed and I carefully followed the developments because I wanted to know what will happen to the workplaces. On the other hand, I knew that we had to react when I saw that the police imposed heavy fines on people who did not wear rubber gloves in public. This measure was insane – **first you couldn’t find them to save your life and second they were expensive as ‘Saint Peter’s eggs’<sup>1</sup>**. People who did not work could not afford it, so how is it fair to have such a measure?

**The moral dimension of ‘fairness’ was among the first triggers which sparked the ‘eccentric phase’** between governments and youth response. The difficult circumstances in which Marko found himself played a major role in instigating a start of a strong decrease in support for government measures. However, the primary trigger was not anger, but a moral obligation of the government – to provide and legitimize action – which failed to be delivered.

When my little brother who is 13 was not allowed to go out at all, while kids in RS were **allowed to and kids in Italy and Germany were allowed to, I figured that these ‘measures’ were not legitimate**. OK, there is a public health danger, but how does keeping kids inside do them any good? Is there a way to re-think? I contacted a neighbour who is a local council representative, but he said this was not his decision and that he could not do anything about it...**this is when I thought that it was our time to react.**

**These words by Mirza (18) from Goražde** echo the feelings of morality and fairness expressed by **all twenty participants. The lack of government’s legitimization of decisions and a refusal to communicate with the public about “scientific grounding for such insane measures” (Miloš, 23)** intensified the speed of transition from alignment to eccentric phase and marked a long period of intensified youth participation across the country. And although these triggers may resonate as being spurred by anger, they were prompted by government responses that warranted, in the opinion of all interviewees, a justification. Adian (25) a postgraduate student of economics from Sarajevo explains his reaction:

I was surprised to see that many older people and even my parents were indifferent towards this measure that **prohibited kids below 18 to go outside at all. Sure, it didn’t touch them, my**

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Expensive as Saint Peter’s Eggs’ is a local saying that indicates a very high price of an item or a service.

brother and I are both older, but seriously, how would they feel if we were younger, running **around the house, wanting to go outside? It's like nobody cared. This is what brought** me to write to the director of the Federal Crisis Unit together with some friends and colleagues who had very young kids at home.

Such a reaction by Adian was not individual, but a wider social cause that incited his attempt to change a government-imposed policy. Dalia (25) a pediatric nurse from Zenica adds to this.

**I don't have children, but a fact that after mostly the young pressured him to change this, he** only allowed kids who had certain development issues to go outside, but only for one hour, prompted me to do more than try to discuss this with the government. We needed a more organized response. Kids suffered.

The triggers for political participation for Adian and Dalia, but also for fourteen other participants who were not directly impacted by government measures or not impacted at all, explain that a critical form of political participation emerged among youth during the crisis. Not only do these words explain how the crisis is easily imbedded into personal daily lives, but how injustice can easily turn into political action for a common social cause. Thus, these youngsters were not simple bystanders but engaged in a moment critical for the well-being of society.

Mateo (19), a musician from Mostar explains that he or his friends never really cared about **politics in ways in which they would discuss it, but that "weak government reactions warranted our attention":**

I could not understand that those below 18 or those above 65 could not go out. I could not **understand why it was prohibited to play outside if you had your own garden...and this only** in the Federation. This warranted action. I never engaged in politics, voted just once, but I could not avoid reaction.

**All the participants describe the triggers which can exclusively be put in the category of 'reaction for a social cause'. This indicates not a selfish or self-interested act of political engagement or an imbedded feeling of hostility towards politics, but simply a situation which was monitored and which, at a certain point, required action. These participants can thus be described as "standby citizens" or "monitorial citizens", a concept proposed by Amnå and Ekman (2014) or Schudson (1996; 1998).** Instead, all the participants had the resources and the competencies needed to react. They had a sufficient level of media and political literacy and the capacity to compare and understand Bosnian government policies in relation to what other countries did. Thus, they sought legitimization of decisions and the response of the decision-makers. Although they may

have appeared like they were doing nothing, the young participants in this research showed that they were on a standby. Hence, the standby period was obviously a moment of learning, the absorption of politics and political decision-making, but also political legitimacy. The fact that the participants were not previously involved in politics, besides possibly voting, shows that differentiation along the traditional political participation continuum does not work well with youth participation during crisis.

Such acts of political engagement that arise out of observation or informed reaction align with the argument proposed by Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005), Rosanvallon (2008), and Amnå and Ekman (2014) about ‘standby’ youth whereby there is a danger of understanding them as standby only because of their general lack of trust in political institutions. In short, the triggers for political participation of Bosnian youth during the Covid-19 crisis follow the logic of “warranted action” towards politics. The fact that political measures imposed during the initial phases of the crisis did not have a direct influence on the participants (e.g. did not impact them individually) points to a situation in which previously inactive youth, at least by standards imposed through existing literature on political participation, can shape political decisions. Although not always successful, such attempts were spurred by wider social causes and shaped the type of political response. The moral obligation of government seemed to be the primary trigger for the participants cited above. This moral dimension overlapped with the commitment to help not just their peers, but society in general. Another trend that is essential in giving importance to youth crisis participation is that in the early days of the crisis, participation underwent a metamorphosis – from unnatural alignment with the government to questioning and reaction to imposed policies. The latter acted as a warrant to incite a formed response. In the next section, the attention is directed towards the later stages of the crisis, where protest emerged as a complementary response to initial attempts to influence government decisions. This will be explored by examining the transformation of triggers and the subsequent reactions which may, as it will be warned, easily turn into violent protests.

### **‘We’ve had Enough’ – Turning the Attention from ‘Warranted’ Action to Mistrust**

The dynamics of youth political participation during crisis demonstrates its fluctuating nature. This is an ordinary occurrence since political decisions also alter abruptly during critical times. However, what has not been recognized in crisis political engagement is the ways in which ‘standby citizens’ turn the course of participation; that is, we do not know at which moments a

**previous trigger of ‘warranted action’ turns into more spectacular forms of participation, such as protest.** What this research showed is that this occurs in ways in which personal motives to react to political action out of the need to impact a social cause or find political reason in government actions are **not satisfied. Such lack of government response to ‘ordinary’ everyday reaction to a crisis decision enhances the political learning process** – citizens, in this case, youth, are sent a message that a government does not care or that there is insufficient knowledge on part of decision-makers about what a legitimized course of action would be. What this work unravels are two subsequent trends that were observed among participants:

1. Crisis political participation among youth is fast-changing as the political learning process unfolds swiftly; and
2. **‘Standby’ citizens (youth) easily transformed ‘warranted action’, which** aroused out of political observation, into protest and, in more extreme cases, complete government mistrust.

In what follows, these trends are further unpacked and the evolution of triggers for such developments is analyzed.

Sanjin (22) a pharmacy student from Sarajevo volunteered in a Covid-19 red zone for ten months. Due to the nature of his job, he followed all government decisions closely and admitted that he has never followed politics much before this:

Such abrupt switches in ideas, decisions that they made was amazing. At one point, after a couple of weeks of trying to understand what was happening, we soon realized that many government policies made no sense – it seemed like we were the only country in Europe that had such strict measures. We started questioning this professionally and had no response.

**He adds that the wider availability of news ‘helped us realize that Covid-19 was not dangerous for the young, so we started questioning the measures’.** As our conversation continued, he often referred to **‘incapable politicians with no knowledge’**. Another participant from Prnjavor, Gvozden (24) shares a similar view, explaining that:

**All politicians in Bosnia, no matter the entity, just ‘copy-pasted’ measures from Serbia, Croatia. So, what Vučić decided to do in Serbia, we would see here 2 or 3 days after. It was clear our politicians were incapable and clueless, I didn’t trust them and this is what got me moving towards protest.”**

These two young people were both critical of the state. In fact, it was the ‘inability of politicians to adequately deal with the health crisis’ (Rahma, 18, Sarajevo) that turned these youngsters into political participants. All of the participants mentioned ‘weak political response’, ‘uninformed government action’, and ‘lack of clarity in communicating meaningful decisions’ when discussing the motives for reacting during the crisis. Zarah, a 23-year-old waitress from Sokolac states:

I was initially fine with not working because it meant that I would not expose my parents to the virus. But with the second lockdown, it seemed like only food-related businesses were **‘virus’s target**. Everything else was open, but restaurants and cafes were closed. This is when I **realized that our decision makers were ‘copy-cats’** – they introduced decisions that in our context did not make any sense. So, I joined the first ever protest against a political decision.

Sanjin, Gvozden, and Zarah point to the rapidly altering nature of crisis participation. As their own understanding of the Covid-19 health crisis grew, so did their learning about the political process – they realized that many of the decisions were *‘uninformed political conclusions made by politicians, not health officials’* (Sanjin, 22). Bang (2005) clearly points out this behavior, explaining that youth is frequently critical of the ability of the state to commit to a social change. **This situation leads to ‘life-politics’ of self-actualization** (Beck, 1992; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). **Norris (2003), in turn, terms this ‘cause-oriented action’, explaining that youth does not react** specifically to the state but towards particular issues. Mona, a 19-year-old student from Goražde further unpacks this trigger-reaction-outcome nexus, pointing that:

Clearly, there was a new political agenda shaping up. I think that young people reacted the most because we were hit the most – schools closed, places where we usually have fun were closed, gatherings prohibited. Initially, it was OK, but the second lockdown was just a **demonstration of political supremacy. It resembled the ‘old regime’**. I lost confidence in their decisions. This is why I travelled to protests across the country.

Although all the participants who took part in protests speak of governments or the state, their reaction, that is protest, highlights that they are not necessarily directing their anger at the government, but only at current decisions. Pattie et al. (2004) **term this ‘micro-political actions’,** which, again, point to a reaction towards a political issue. Iman (22) from Sarajevo adds to this:

I decided to protest immediately after the Premier of Canton Sarajevo announced that only the city Sarajevo was going into a lockdown. Facebook was stormed with jokes about crossing the entity border to go to East Sarajevo, a 15-minute or less drive from downtown. People were gathering for beer just a few kilometers away different during a lockdown weekend in Sarajevo. East Sarajevo had different measures – in fact, they were fully open!

Just a few days earlier, Iman participated in protests against a weekend lockdown in Sarajevo. **Mirna (20) who is a law student from Goražde living in Sarajevo also joined the protests with Iman** because:

**legally, they didn't make any sense. It was just a clueless, uninformed reaction which hurt** many businesses, sparked further fear and even worse, and everybody knew it, it was an intro to a stricter measure to follow because, literally, the whole city moved to other cities around Sarajevo and had fun like nothing was happening. And of course, numbers rose just after that weekend – it was a counter measure! How can we trust them after they intentionally rose the numbers up? They knew it was going to happen!

These accounts of personal motives to participate, in most cases for the first time, lead to a claim that a crisis political participation among youth is of a rapidly changing nature and that youths are **not 'disengaged' in a classical meaning** of political non-participation, but that through learning, analyzing and absorbing every-day politics, **they turn to 'cause-oriented actions' (Norris, 2003)** and engage for matters that spark their interest.

In addition to this, twelve participants **spoke of "fun-killing politicians", a term which** demonstrates that young people must be considered non-traditional participants – that is, they shy away from an adult-centering understanding of politics because it dismisses them and their forms of participation. This is especially true in crisis participation, which often takes on a form of protest against obligations that are imposed on them, but that is unjustified. Just as Fedja (20) **claims 'we are more critical than the old. The old are used to listening to Tito, the orders, the iron fist. We don't buy into that. Justify what you're doing is my motto and of all those people who gathered with me in the streets'. This understanding of critical and observational engagement** goes back to the works of Schudson (1998) in which he claims that these participants tend to avoid routine types of political participation. They monitor politics but act when they feel that there is a need. This forms the second perspective in understanding the nature of youth political participation during crisis. Svjetlana, a 20-year-old journalism student from Sokolac who now lives in East Sarajevo says:

**I generally don't trust politicians, although, at times, I may agree with them. But this time, the** nonsense, the lack of proof for what they were imposing on us, from rubber gloves to no kids outside, was ignorant, unjustified and motivated by what?! People, especially the young, felt **like politicians turned against 'us'... 'us' the people and 'them' the politicians. If this doesn't warrant protest, then what does? I gave you my voice, I chose you and you're clueless.**

This claim points to a failure of justified political response which triggered action, but more importantly, demonstrates that a general claim that youth are disengaged does not stand despite their declining party membership or voter turnout statistics. Simply, youth monitor and this is how **they express interest in politics. When there is a major disagreement over a seemingly ‘micro-issue’, the process of supervising politicians is a trigger for warranted action and even protest.** Similarly, Irfan (19) from Mostar shortly tells:

Youth is not **passive. Youth is more informed because we didn’t grow up learning how to stay hushed.** This is not the old regime. The ways we react today are different – we might not always vote, but we understand politics more than voters. The protests against Covid-19 measures were youth protests. The old hid.

This statement shows that observation and learning were strong drivers of youth protests among young people from BiH during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although triggered by a crisis and, in their **words ‘uninformed politicians’, the young proved to be closely monitoring politics. They were** reactive to issues which mattered to them, but also to the wider society. What is more, I wish to highlight the metamorphosis through which youth political participation during the Covid-19 crisis evolved in BiH. This points to a new trend in political engagement among post-modern citizens - the general path of *observation-trigger-reaction vinculum*. In such a constellation, *observations are informed, triggers follow the learning process* (the more I know, the more I am triggered) and *reaction is based on the extent of impact*. Such political engagement may indeed be termed sporadic, but it points to a new generation of informed political participants who supervise and criticize those in power. Lastly, such participants are not necessarily distrustful of politics, but appear to make more rational decisions about when and why to participate.

## Conclusions

This paper empirically assesses political participation among youth from Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Covid-19 pandemic. The work is posited against the understanding that crisis participation takes on a reactive form, whereby it is merely a response to an emergency which is often manifested through protest. Talking about politics during crisis with the young has revealed important findings about the extent of reaction and reasons behind youth response to government actions. The findings demonstrate that youth engagement is no longer fit for

contextualization within the traditional political participation paradigm, which proved especially important during crisis.

The results demonstrate a plethora of varying positions which explain the relationship between triggers and the extent of reaction, enabling thus a better understanding of what **happens when ‘standby youth’ (Amnå, Ekman, 2014) engages politically. The first dimension** relates to a trigger sparked by a **‘reaction for a social cause’, a finding which illustrates a non-selfish** or self-interested act of engagement, but a situation that is closely monitored and which warrants a reaction. This is reported in studies of Amnå and Ekman (2014) or Schudson (1996; 1998), but in the case of youth from BiH, the reasons for participation were triggered not just **by ‘monitoring’,** but also by the need to seek legitimization of actions taken on by decision-makers. Initially, the **process of ‘monitoring’ did produce a seeming effect of ‘doing nothing’, but this ‘standby’ moment** indicated a learning process. Instead, **youth’s political disengagement seems to be related to** political learning and observation. This, in turn, confirms that the political participation of post-modern citizens (that is also the youth) must not differentiate along the traditional political participation continuum (Malafaia et al. 2021). This stands even more during times of crisis.

In short, the young participants showed that, after an initial period of **learning/observation, they were quite engaged. Following the logic of ‘warranted action’,** the findings demonstrate that youth participation occurs if an issue is close to them. Wider social causes shaped the **youth’s political response in this case, while moral obligations of the** government were their primary trigger to engage (commitment to help their peers, but also the **entire society). What emerges here is the importance of the ‘ordinariness’ and the response as pushed by ‘standby citizens’ with a turnout which points that the country is dealing with a new** generation of politically active citizens. **These participants did not engage in “spectacular anti-state activism” (Harris et al., 2010, p. 10), but explored ‘ordinary’ and everyday actions in order to** choose the right moment to engage.

Overall, this study feeds the literature on youth political participation during crisis by **highlighting young people’s own assessment of the importance of youth participation in the early** days of the crisis. Moreover, it describes a participatory metamorphosis – the initial unnatural alignment with the government, to informed triggers and warranted reaction to imposed measures. The latter acted as an affirmation to incite a formed response. In addition, this study points to the role of observation and learning, both of which were strong drivers of youth protests. Lastly, the study reveals a new trend in political engagement among young citizens - the general

path of the observation-trigger-reaction nexus. This vinculum where observations are informed, triggers follow the learning process, and reaction is based on the extent of the impact is worthy of further investigation, both in and outside traditional political participation paradigms. Although such types of participation may be sporadic, this study points to a new generation of informed young political participants who supervise and criticize those in power. And although they cannot be expected to be inevitably distrustful of politics, they seem to make informed decisions about when and why to participate.

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