

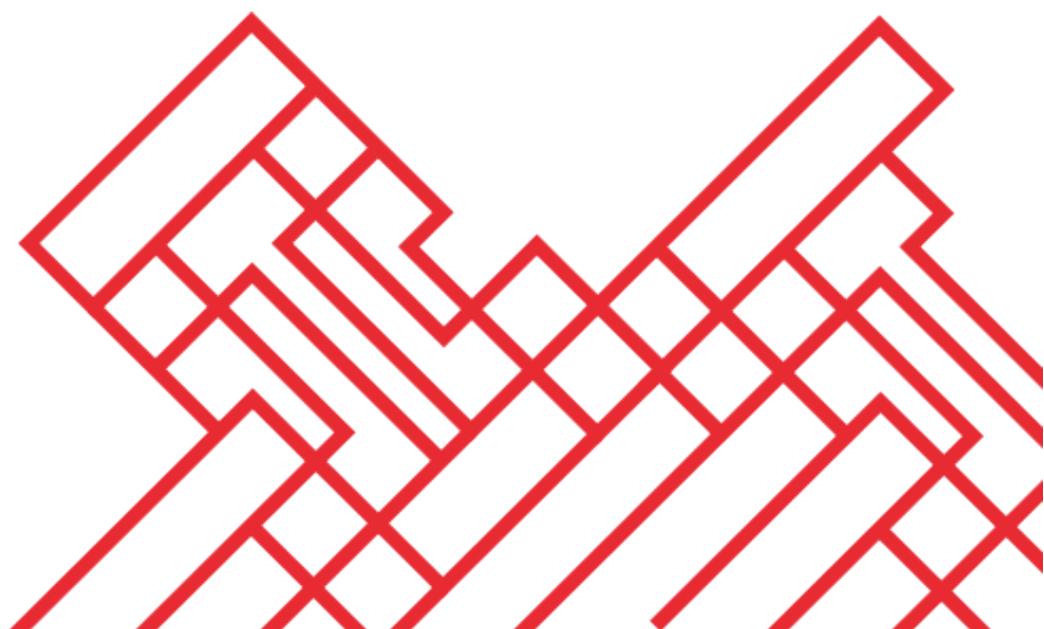
ПРОГРАМА ЗА ПАРЛАМЕНТАРНА ПОДДРШКА
PROGRAMI PËR MBËSHITETJE PARLAMENTARE
PARLIAMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Policy Brief No.30/2021

Debate Quality in Parliament - a Brief Overview of the Debate Quality in the Period Between 2020 and 2021

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I. Introduction

The debate quality in Assembly is analyzed using the so-called Discourse Quality Index, developed by the Institute for Democracy on the basis of the work by professors Marko R. Steenbergen, André Bächtiger, Marcus Spörndli and Jung Steiner in the study entitled: "Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Index".¹ The index is an instrument that makes it possible for each individual speech act at the session that was observed to be coded using a number of main traits: the degree of argumentation of the speech (how many arguments there are in each discussion); the degree of respect that the speaker has towards the other MPs and their arguments; the openness to accept the arguments of the others and changing one's own standpoints because higher quality arguments were presented in the deliberation; whether the MPs could express their views unhindered.

In January 2018 a new system of debate quality assessment was introduced. The semi-annual reports from the observation of the quality of the debate in Assembly include the general grade on a scale of 1 - lowest score to 10 - highest score for the quality of the debate according to the Discourse Quality Index. One (1), or the lowest grade, means

that the MPs are not using any arguments during their address, do not make reference to certain principles, twist their arguments, do not change their position and they do not accept arguments, do not refer to the arguments of others or they do change their position, but not because of the arguments of the collocutor. Grade one (1) also means that the MPs do not show respect towards the other participants and their arguments (MPs or external participants), that the discussion is being interrupted and that at a certain point the speakers were interrupted physically.

On the other hand, grade ten (10), which means that the debate is of excellent quality, means that the MPs use more than two arguments, or at least one argument in their address, make reference to certain principles, adequately address the arguments, yield their position as a result of better arguments, show respect towards the person and the arguments of the other participants in the discussion (MPs or external participants), there is no interruption in the discussion and there is no restriction of the right of speech.

¹ Steenbergen, M.R., Bächtiger, A., Spörndli, M., Steiner, J., 2003. Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Index. *Comp. Eur. Polit.* 1, 21–48. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cep.6110002>

II. Debate quality in Parliament

The report of the Institute for Democracy for the period between January and June 2021² points to a relatively low debate quality in the Assembly in the last 2 years, and confirms the conclusion that there is room for significant improvement. On a scale of 1 - lowest to 10 - highest, the mean

score of the debate quality in the Assembly in the first half of 2021 is 5.6, which, compared to the previous period under observation, has improved marginally in terms of the degree of argumentation (August - December 2020³, 5.5)

Chart 1. Assessment of the debate quality for 2020 and 2021 on a scale from 1 - lowest to 10 - highest

2020 (August-December)	2021 (January-June)
5.5	5.6

III. Level of argumentation

In terms of the argumentation of the discussions, in broad terms the level of argumentation of the participants in the discussions in the in the Assembly has improved in comparison to the previous period under observation (August - December 2020). A positive change can also be detected in the use of one or more arguments in the period under observation.

The report on the debate quality also measures the degree of reasoning, which is used to determine the level of argumentation of the speakers during their addresses. In the period between January-

June 2021, the speakers had no arguments in 38% of their addresses, while in 48% of the addresses the argumentation was weak. The speakers had one or more arguments in only 14% of the addresses.

In the period between August and December 2020, the speakers did not use any arguments in 44% of their addresses, which is a gradual improvement in comparison to the period between January and June 2021 (38%). However, on the other hand, weak argumentation is gradually on the rise; while between August and December 2020, 45% of the discussions

² Parliament Watch: Monitoring report on the debate quality in the Parliament (January-June 2021), accessed at: https://idsocs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/A4_Kvalitet_na_debata_januari_juni_2021MKD.pdf (last visited on: September 19, 2021)

³ Parliament Watch: Monitoring report on the debate quality in the Parliament (August-December 2020), accessed at: https://idsocs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A4_Kvalitet_na_debata_avgust_dekembri_2020MKD-3.pdf (last visited on: September 19, 2020)

were supported by weak arguments, in the period between January and June 2021 the speakers had poor arguments in 48% of their addresses. A moderately positive change can also be detected in the use of one or more arguments. In the

period between August and December 2020, the speakers used one or more arguments in 11% of their discussions, while in the period between January and June 2021 one or more arguments were used in 14% of the discussion.

Chart 2. Level of argumentation in discussions (%)

Argumentation	2020 (August-December)	2021 (January-June)
No arguments	44%	38%
Weak argumentation	45%	48%
One or more arguments	11%	14%

IV. Participation of female MPs in the discussion

In the report on the period between January and June 2021, the participation of female MPs in the parliamentary discussion has increased in comparison to the period between August and December 2020. In this period, the ranking of the 10 most active MPs includes four female MPs, Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, Blagica Lasovska, Eli Panova and Snezana Kaleska Vanceva. On the other hand, the report on the 10 most active MPs for the period between August and December 2020 includes 3

female MPs, Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, Dafina Stojanovska and Zaklina Lazarevska.

The comparison of the two reports also points to an 8% increase of the participation of female MPs. While in the period between August and December 2020 women participated in 35% of the discussions, according to the January - June 2021 report, they had taken part in 43% of the discussions.

Chart 3. Participation of women in parliamentary discussions (%)

2020 (August-December)	2021 (January-June)
35%	43%

V. The power of a better argument

In the discussions under observation in the period between January and June 2021, no change in the positions of the MPs has been recorded, neither because the collocutors had better arguments nor due to other reasons. While in the period between August and December 2020 the MPs did not reflect on the strength and quality of the argument of the other speakers in 54% of the discussions, that was true in 46% of the discussions in the period between January and June 2021. The fact that less of the arguments of the other speakers are ignored points

to an improvement in the interaction between the MPs. Still, the MPs maintained their views and did not acknowledge the value of the arguments of their colleagues from the other political parties. In the period between January and June 2021, the MPs did this in 40% of the discussions, while in the period between August and December 2020, that was the case in 37% of the discussions, which points to a slight worsening of the situation in the first half of 2021.

Chart 4. The power of a better argument (%)

Power of a better argument	2020 (August-December)	2021 (January-June)
The MPs do not relate to the strength and quality of the arguments of the other speakers	54%	46%
The MPs maintain their views and do not acknowledge the value of the arguments of their colleagues from the other political options	37%	40%

VI. Attitude towards the arguments and the personality of the MPs from another party

Between January and June 2021, the MPs focused more of their attention to reflecting on the personality of their collocutors than listening to their arguments. In 12% of the addresses, the MPs respected or partially respected the arguments of the MPs from the other political party, while between August and December 2020 that happened in 16% of the discussions, which means that there was a drop of 4% or regression in the mostly respectable atmosphere for discussion in the Assembly. On the other hand, between

January and June 2021, the MPs demonstrated disrespect or partial disrespect of the arguments in 15% of the discussions, while between August and December 2020 this figure was 26%, so between January and June 2021 there is 11% progress. Nonetheless, the fact that there was less disrespect of the arguments of the other MPs does not necessarily mean that respect in the Assembly was improved, because it supports the fact that the MPs ignored the arguments of their collocutors and reflected on their personalities.

Chart 5. Attitude towards the arguments of the MPs from another party (%)

Attitude towards the arguments of the MPs from another party	2020 (August-December)	2021 (January-June)
Respect or partial respect	16%	12%
Disrespect or partial disrespect	26%	15%

In terms of the personality of the MPs from other parties, there is a different trend. In 2020, there was respect or partial respect in 29% of the discussions, while in 2021 this figure is 32%, which is a marked improvement. On the

other hand, there is a negative trend, so there was disrespect or partial disrespect of the personality of the MPs from other parties in 9% of the discussions in 2020, while this figure soared to 20% in 2021.

Chart 6. Attitude towards the personality of the MPs from another party (%)

Attitude towards the personality of the MPs from another party	2020 (August-December)	2021 (January-June)
Respect or partial respect	29%	32%
Disrespect or partial disrespect	9%	20%

VII. The marginalized groups in the Assembly

The report for the period between January and June 2021 confirms the fact that the MPs constantly paid little attention to the rights of the marginalized groups, which is evident in all periods that were under observation. In this period, the MPs did not reflect on the rights of the marginalized groups in approximately 89% of the discussions, unless the discussion was specifically

focused on a certain law or a topic from the agenda related to their rights. Nonetheless, in comparison to the previous period (August - December 2020), when the speakers did not reflect on the marginalized groups in more than 93% of their addresses, there is gradual improvement.

Chart 7. Representation of the marginalized groups in the Assembly (%)

The marginalized groups in the Assembly	
2020 (August-December)	2021 (January-June)
93%	89%

VIII. Recommendations

Based on the data that was presented in this brief analysis, but also on account of the considerable number of years the Institute for Democracy (IDSCS) has spent on observing the work of the Assembly, here are a couple of recommendations that could be implemented to improve the quality of the debate:

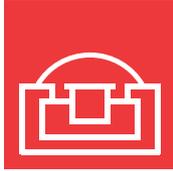
- If the MPs were more informed and knowledgeable on the topics that are being discussed, and if their debate and oratory skills were improved, the debate in the Assembly would be of considerably higher quality

- The Assembly ought to be involved in the process of regulatory impact assessment (RIA), which would contribute to increasing the quality and argumentation of the discussions by a considerable margin

- The MPs should be careful with the summary procedure and the procedure for reviewing EU-related draft-laws and use those procedures sparingly

- It is of essential importance that the MPs acquire expertise and gain understanding of the influence the laws have on the life of different types of citizens

- If the MPs were more informed and knowledgeable on the topics that are being discussed, and if their debate and oratory skills were improved, the debate in the Assembly would be of considerably higher quality. The Parliamentary Institute (PI) and the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) that operate under the umbrella of the Assembly offer services that may be helpful in addressing these needs of the MPs. Namely, the PI and the PBO carry out research on topics of interest for the MPs, as well as education and training activities in specific areas. For these reasons, the MPs must use the services of the PI and the PBO to a greater extent and more effectively.



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