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Bringing the Latvian Youth Back to Political Participation

Abstract

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in the first democratic national elections of 1993, voter turnout in Latvia was 89.9 per cent. However, by the late 90s, participation levels had significantly decreased. Scholars have pointed out that this decrease was a result of people gradually learning the limits of democratic governance while tackling the feeling of political powerlessness and decreasing trust in politicians and political institutions – all of which have had negative effects on civil society and democratic ideals. Youths in particular were affected by the sum of all this, seeing, first-hand, income inequality, economic stagnation, corruption, and personal unemployment (or that of their parents). All this, combined with a lack of democratic traditions, has resulted in scepticism and political apathy. This paper shows that, since 2009, Latvia has seen a decrease in all forms of political participation, including a share of its youths who run as MP candidates in elections. The paper aims to clarify what would help bring Latvian youths back into politics.

Keywords: Civil Society, Political Participation, Democracy, Political Activism, Youth

Introduction

Few studies have been done on the role youth-based political participation plays in the formation of an active and knowledgeable civil society and in the development of democracy in Latvia.¹ Similarly to other West-

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¹ Studies have been carried out on the participation of minorities in democratic processes in Latvia, which dealt with individual factors regarding the involvement of minorities in political processes. A study titled “Political and Political participation of Young People in Latvia: Myplace Policy Issues of the 7th Framework Programme” focused on the participation of young people in the context of the European Union.

ern countries, Latvia has seen a gradual decline in political participation, indicated by a drop in voter turnout in all elections. Several studies on political behaviour have been carried out over the decades, with mass political participation seen as an important element in a well-functioning democracy (LeDuc, Niemi, Norris, 2009). It is just as important that Latvia has a small proportion of the people involved in political parties – only 0.7% to 1% of Latvia's population is involved in political parties, while the EU average is 4.7% (Karlson, 2017).

Robert Dahl once stated that the purpose of democracy is to reach a compromise between the power of the majority and the power of minorities in a balance between the political equality of all adult citizens, and a desire to limit their sovereignty (Dahl, 1967). In Latvia's case, young people, as well as issues raised by them, are often relegated to the sidelines, thus creating the minority mentioned by Robert Dahl; their problems are not taken into account, thus undermining their interest and involvement in civil activities. Those who are 50+ catch the attention of political parties, because of their numbers.

In order to change the current situation, and to promote the involvement of young people, it would require both a set of knowledge and skills that would allow the individuals to play an active part in democratic processes. The aim of this paper is to clarify the reasons that would help bring youths back into politics.

Democracy and Political Participation, and the Declining Civic Engagement of Youth

Political participation is one of the key conditions for the consolidation of democracy. According to research, a strong, well-functioning democracy is based on the assumption that citizens can participate in the decision-making process in various ways and that, in practice, they will also do so, thereby reviving the republican ideal of citizens actively engaged in public policy (LeDuc, Niemi, Norris, *op. cit.*). In a time and age, when political participation levels dwindle, it becomes a highly contested topic, so researchers try to focus on a variety of political behaviour norms that tend to increase political participation in hopes that it will become a fix for democratic societies struggling with political participation and

There was also a study carried out as part of the Latvian State Research Program project titled "The Culture of Trust: Politically Active Youth Perception of Trust in Democracy and Civil Society in Latvia", which looked more broadly at the core of a democratic society; trust, and how it is set up and what determines it. This study also focused on youth.

democratic values. Since there is no “normative” that says what constitutes a functioning democracy, increased levels of political participation point either to satisfaction or widespread discontent with the existing political regime. Conflicting demands on the part of society are becoming increasingly common and, in the long-term, political decision-making is becoming increasingly difficult, as politicians are confronted with the overload of public demands. It influences the prestige of the policy decision-makers’ profession and does not create transparency by undermining young people’s desire to engage in the policy agenda process (Ibidem).

A democratic society offers various forms of political participation, ranging from simple (voter turnout in elections) to difficult (membership in political parties), as well as from the conventional (debating and communicating with political representatives), to the unconventional (protests, riots). Voter turnout is, without doubt, the simplest and most common form of political participation, because it requires the least political input in terms of knowledge, finances, and effort. Studies show that voter turnout in elections is substantially higher among the better educated, although it must be pointed out that it is the amount of education that one has that seems to count, and not how rich or poor that person is (Dalton, Klingemann, 2009). And this remains true for most other forms of political behaviour. Those who are male, older, better educated, are financially better off, and who have a broad network of social acquaintances are politically more active than the young, uneducated poor who come from marginalised groups. And yet, these groups also tend to find their forms of political behaviour when pushed to the extreme. Poorly educated groups depend more broadly on the mobilisation processes, e.g., by trade unions, demonstrations, protests or riots. All these forms of civic engagement ensure the full functioning of a democracy. The majority of people tend to involve themselves in these specific civic activities less frequently, however said activities do allow individuals to express their views in a quick and effective manner. Unfortunately, these activists tend to fall prey to opinion leaders who are borderline or outright populists. In the long term, this divergent perception from different groups of society can have a significant impact on the results of the electoral process (LeDuc, Niemi, Norris, op. cit.).

Joint political action groups promoting political participation are equally important, such as associations, interest groups, political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), etc. (Hooghe, 2014), but require considerable resources in terms of knowledge, finances, and time from those involved in them (LeDuc, Niemi, Norris, op. cit.). These may also be considered one step closer to membership in political parties. Ever

since the first systematic studies of political participation, research has shown that those who join political parties, like those who participate in most types of political activities, are not a demographically representative sample of the electorate (Ibidem). For one, party members tend to be male rather than female, and in general have above average levels of education and income. They also tend to be older than the population average (Dalton, Klingemann, op. cit.). The available research on political socialisation strongly suggests that experiences during childhood, youth, and adolescence – whether in the family, at school, or within peer groups – shape enduring patterns of social and political attitudes (Ibidem). Therefore, an individual's political behaviour is expected to be relatively stable throughout their lifetime (Ibidem). Studies carried out in Western democracies have even shown that these attitudes and behaviours can persist from one generation to the next insofar as youths acquire a party identification from their parents (Butler, Stokes, 1970). Theories of path dependence postulate that attitudes and behaviour persist because the costs in time, money, or emotions are greater than the immediately perceived benefits of changing one's behaviour and beliefs (Sewell, 1996). The stability of individual behaviour can also characterise political institutions. David Easton's (1965) seminal study postulated a regime in a steady state equilibrium due to a feedback process relating the input of citizens, the output of governors, and the response that citizens made to governmental output. In this way, democracies are expected to be "stable" or "consolidated" (Dalton, Klingemann, op. cit.). In post-communist countries there was none of that.²

The decline of youth-based participation in political processes is a malady that has affected most Western societies, as democracy is being taken for granted. For several decades now, there have been studies that have shown that people are becoming less and less involved in political processes, and youths in general are no exception to this (Rahn, Transue, 1998). At the same time, however, not all is doom and gloom. We have to remember that youths have never shown a particular interest in politics, and this age shows no particular difference. The latest research from this

² In post-communist countries, youths were not taught democratic values and practices, nor did they inherit party identification from their parents or grandparents, since after the collapse of the Soviet Union, new countries were formed with a different political regime and very unstable political party systems. Education and income were equally poor across the society, and there can hardly be any talk of class, racial or neighbourhood differences, as essentially everyone rose from the post-communist world on an equally poor footing in a homogeneous society. It has taken 30 years for education differences and class differences to start to emerge, but even now the differences are minute.

region (e.g., Allaste, Saari study of Estonian and Finnish youths in 2020) shows that today's young people are engaging in politicised activities and are more attuned to the concerns of their own generation, as opposed to issues more relevant to their parents. Youth-based political activism takes a less overt and more individualised approach, and young people today are enthusiastic about online participation and engaging in it in different ways (Allaste, Saari, 2019). That said, we should not dismiss the age-old qualities that increase political participation and stimulate political interest in youths. In order to change the current situation with the decline in the participation of young people, education should still be the first and most important factor that will affect the political participation of the whole of society. Communities of highly educated individuals tend to be more civic and political rectification among young people progresses more smoothly there (Blais, 2006; Tenn, 2007). Cognitive complexity, directly linked to high levels of education, means that highly educated citizens are clearly more inclined to the importance of the elections, seeing political regimes and the functioning of society in their entirety rather than divided (Blais, op. cit.).

Political Behaviour of Youths in Latvia

Political participation includes all forms of behaviour by which citizens wish to influence the setting of the political agenda and the decision-making process. It is voluntary, and covers wide-ranging activities. The lack of willingness of young people to engage in political-agenda setting is of great concern. Following the restoration of independence of the Republic of Latvia, 89.9% of voters participated in the first Saeima elections held in 1993 (Cvk.lv., 1993). However, this level of civic activity has gradually decreased. In 2018, in the 13th Saeima elections only 54.6% of the voting population participated (Ibidem). A study conducted in 2013 showed that only 2% of young people in Latvia are involved in youth organisations of political parties, and regularly involve themselves in political discussions (Daugulis et al., 2019).³

³ Latvia has the lowest number of young people who engage in public activities among the Baltic States. According to Eurobarometer, in 2017 only 16% of young people participate in NGO activities, and just 4% were involved in political parties. In a study conducted by the OECD and PISA in 2018, Latvian youths show the lowest levels of civic competence among the democratic countries of the Baltic Sea region, as well as the third lowest level of competence among European countries. A survey from the Ministry of Education and Science entitled "Survey of young people in Latvia 2020", which highlights the views of political participation, the opportunities of the European Union, etc., shows that only 8% of young people highly assess their

The decline in voter turnout cannot be directly linked to the apolitical attitudes of young people, nor to the reluctance to participate in the political agenda. It is rather a result of multi-faceted factors, of which civic education is one aspect. The subject “Politics and Law” was introduced in secondary schools with the aim of promoting young people’s awareness of politics and promoting political participation (Likumi.lv, 2013). But the subject is an elective course that pupils can choose from a list of other subjects that focus on social sciences, including philosophy, economics, geography, etc. Moreover, even if a pupil chooses “Politics and Law”, the class is limited to one 40-minute class per week, in which the teacher must achieve the aim of the class, which is: “promoting the analytical skills of pupils regarding the society, state and socioeconomic and political processes” (Ibidem). In reality, schools often do not have the necessary capacity, and offer only specific lessons. Consequently, the number of pupils who will learn these nationally important issues is reduced dramatically. The lack of compliance with the “Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia for 2030” shows that it should be mandatory to raise citizens’ awareness of social and state processes in the field of social sciences (sociology, politics, anthropology and economics) (Pkc.gov.lv, 2021). This begs the question of what the problem is in achieving these objectives if the country’s long-term strategy includes certain basic criteria, and why educational institutions do not indicate in the specific field that the stated education standard objective cannot be achieved as laid down by law.⁴

The share of young people against the general population in Latvia also decreases, having fallen from 16.6% in 2011 to 12.2% in 2020 (Ibidem). This data may appear to be of minor importance, but youth-based agenda issues are not included in political party platforms, because youths constitute a small portion of the society. Political parties have no incentive to do that because these issues are unimportant and will not secure enough votes in elections. Politicians are not interested in youths precisely because of their political passivity (Daugulis et al., 2019). Only

ability to influence the decision-making process at municipal level, with this indicator going up to 5% at the national level. Moreover, it should be noted that only 19% of Latvian pupils show civil competence according to the survey conducted by ICCS in 2016. According to Ireta Čakse, a researcher at the University of Latvia, the low level of civil society competence reflects how society understands democratic processes in general. The fact that less than only one fifth of Latvia’s young people are politically and civically competent in will not enable the country to fully develop and realise all the opportunities for economic development and growth provided by a democratic government the long term.

⁴ Cabinet Order No 256 on the “Implementation Plan for the Youth Policy 2016–2020”.

19% of youths show civic competences – the number of young people entering the parliament decreased by 3.4% between 2010 and 2018, and in the European Parliament elections, the number of members of the youth category fell by 14.0%.⁵ The sharp drop in youth candidates raises some concern about the interests, desire, and need for young people to engage in civic activities. An analysis of the ICCS survey results show that young people’s understanding of democracy and its importance is low, which, in the modern era of information, is considered to be a necessity for them to be able to analyse and participate in political processes (Čakse, 2018). The popularity of collective petitions has increased, and this particular form of political participation is open to people as young as 16. The public initiative platform “Manabalss.lv” (MyVoice.lv) has had 1,759,019 votes cast on the platform since 2011 (Manabalss.lv., 2021).

Political agenda in Latvia focuses on the increase of political participation and development of civil society. This issue is addressed not only by those directly responsible, but also by NGOs, experts, the academia, and even various research projects funded by the EU. The problem identified by all concerned is a lack of continuity and feedback. Even though politicians in most cases manage to adopt various laws and regulations to achieve set objectives, in many cases they are not carried through, or they do not make sure that the objectives can be reached based on the available resources, both monetary and human. An analysis of party platforms from 2010 until 2020 show that parties have little interest in the topic. An analysis of four political parties that were represented in all four Saeimas that were elected from 2010 until 2020 (National Alliance, Union of Greens and Farmers, Unity/New Unity, Harmony) shows that all of these political parties provided only general information in their pre-election campaigns regarding education and the promotion of political participation

⁵ Since the parliamentary 10th Saeima elections in 2010, which saw 21.3% of young people as party members, and 16.3% choosing to run for office, this number has gradually continued to decrease. In the parliamentary elections of 2011, the total number of young people in parties was 20.9%, however 18.0% ran for office. In the parliamentary elections of 2014, the number of young people in the parties decreased to 19.9%, of which 16.2% ran for office, and in the Saeima elections of 2018, the number of young people in parties fell to 16.7% and parliamentary candidates represented only 12.9% of young people in the elections. The situation was similar with the European Parliament elections, where the total number of young people in political parties in the 2009 elections was 21.6%, while the number of candidates in the youth category was as high as 24.2%. In the 2014 elections, the total number of young people in political parties was 19.9%, while the number of candidates decreased to 11.8%. Finally in the 2019 elections, the total number of young people in the political parties showed a total of 16.7%, while only 10.2% of young people ran in the elections.

– none of them provided a specific solution that could be reached within a certain time frame. This, in turn, was reflected in the agenda set by the Saeima - any debates on education and the promotion of political participation among young people were extremely rare.⁶ It is hardly surprising that party platforms show no interest in the promotion of civic education among the young; few parties mention it, with even fewer support it with funding. In order to achieve the objective of increasing the participation of young people in civic life and politics, the responsible authorities should reach the agenda of political parties with an actual desire to implement these ideas to affect the policy of civil society in the long run.

Methods

In order to determine the political behaviour of youths, and what should be done to bring youths back into politics by increasing their participation, two methods were used – a quantitative online survey, and focus groups.

Young people covering the age group 18–30 were surveyed. The survey questionnaire was completed between 25th October and 7th November, 2021 by 200 respondents. The questionnaire had a non-probable sample due to geographical and epidemiological constraints because of the Covid-19 pandemic. These factors limited the sample of the study, so even though the results cannot be applied to the entire youth population, they show possible trends of political behaviour.

Respondents gave answers to 14 questions, 10 of which were closed questions, and four were open-ended questions. The survey focused on the political activities of youths, their interest in political and socio-economic issues, as well as their trust levels in public institutions, relatives, and various famous people in Latvia. 55.8% of the surveyed were women, 40.2% were male, with 4.0% choosing not to disclose their gender. 18.7% had completed higher education, 11.6% had not completed their studies at university, 20.2% had finished high school or a vocational school, 45.5% had finished primary school and 3.5% of the respondents chose not to disclose their level of completed education.

Focus groups were held in a suburban school of Riga (High School No 41) on 20 September 2021, organising 12 focus groups. The average number of focus group participants in each group was 6–9, and they were

⁶ Even though Saeima debates on education policy in Latvia have been held regularly, in 2010 none of the debates focused on education policy. In 2011, 2014, and 2016 there was only one debate, in 2012, 2013, and 2017 there were three, in 2015 none, and two in 2018.

aged 17–19 (grades 10–12). There were four groups of 10th grade students – they had not previously had the subject of “Politics and Law.” 11th grade had studied the subject for one year; 12th grade pupils had studied the subject for two years. The length of each focus group session was 40 minutes, during which six questions were asked referring to internal Latvian politics, two questions referred to international news, one question determined their media consumption habits and one question was asked specifically to determine what in their opinion would help them get more involved in civic life, and increase their political participation levels.

Results

The next Saeima elections in Latvia will be held in October 2022. The results show that 50.5% of surveyed young people would choose to participate in the elections of the 14th Saeima in 2022, 41.5% would choose not to participate, with 8% not being able give a definite answer. According to the surveyed youths, fewer would participate in the 14th Saeima elections than actually participated in the 13th Saeima elections in 2018, when 54.6% participated. The political participation of young people is influenced by a number of factors, with the level of education being raised as one of the key factors. Chart No 1 summarises the results of the potential participation of young people in 14th Saeima elections with their level of education.

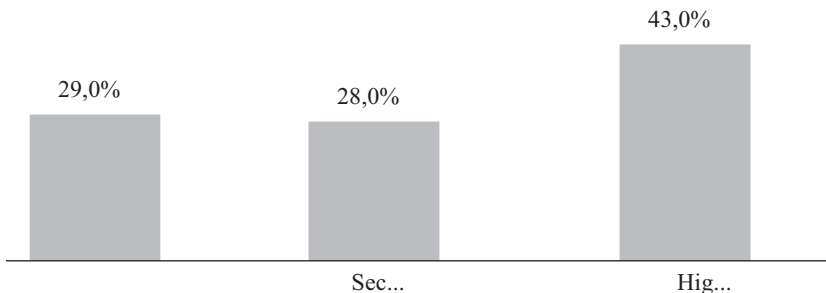


Chart 1: Planned participation of youths in the 14th Saeima elections and their level of education, 2021

Source: made by author according to the gathered data of a questionnaire that was completed between 25 October and 7 November 2021.

This shows how important education is – the higher the education, the higher the willingness to participate in elections; there is no real difference between those who have completed primary and secondary education. This suggests that there is no substantial change in the politi-

cal participation rates of young people following the acquisition of a basic education at secondary school and elective class “Politics and Law” (Visc.gov.lv, 2013). Mastering this subject ensures that knowledge acquired at the level of primary education is strengthened and that there is no gap of three years between theoretical knowledge in grade 9 and their first participation in one of the elections at the age of 18.

Young people were asked how often they discussed politics in their families. The results reveal that some young people discussed politics with family members on a regular basis; 44.0% of respondents said they discussed politics at least once a week, while a total of 67.5% do so at least a few times a month. At the same time, 24.5% of young people surveyed said they discussed political processes less than once a month, or never (see Chart 2).⁷

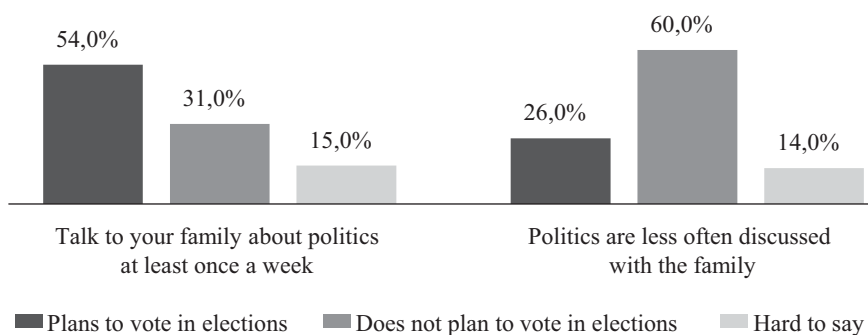


Chart 2: Planned participation of youths in the 14th Saeima elections and their discussions about politics with family members, 2021

Source: made by the author according to gathered data of a questionnaire that was completed between 25 October and 7 November 2021.

Media literacy is important for young people, given that information on political processes is mainly obtained via internet news portals (78.5%), social media (71.5%) and during conversations with relatives (56.0%).

⁷ The results show that family plays an important role; young people who talk about politics at least once a week with their family members show higher potential participation in the 14th Saeima elections. Regardless of the content discussed, regular inclusion of political processes in discussions with relatives improves the prospects for the political participation of young people. The survey shows that 50.0% of young people watch or listen to the news at least once a week, 29.5% do this less frequently than once a week, 13.5% do not watch or listen to the news at all, with 7.5% not being able to give a specific answer. It appears that the proportion of young people who follow the news regularly (at least once a week) is almost the same as the percentage of young people who would participate in the 14th Saeima elections.

There is no “professional journalism filter” on the internet, particularly on social media, which provides information in an objective manner and covers all stakeholders, and therefore the skills of young people to distinguish between reliable sources of information and manipulative content are very important. Results of this study show a link between the potential participation of young people in elections and how often the family talks about policies.

The internet has contributed to the emergence of new forms of political participation, such as establishing contact with politicians via social media, the signing of initiatives, mobilising people for protests and expressing opinion, both publicly and in different groups. In Latvia, young people generally made very few attempts to establish communication with politicians – in the last year, 3.0% of respondents said they had attempted to contact a Saeima member on social media, while 4.5% had tried to contact a local government member. Over the past year, 38.0% of young people surveyed said they had signed up for some initiatives on manabalss.lv.

Since 1996, the highest figures for public trust in parliament and government were during the 8th Saeima in 2002, when the Cabinet was trusted by 51.4% of people and the parliament by 47.9% of Latvia’s residents (Eglītis, 2021). Trust levels since then have fallen sharply – in early 2009, only 7.3% trusted the Cabinet, while 4.5% trusted the Saeima. After 2009, the situation improved slightly and in the spring of 2021, the Cabinet was trusted by 23.0%, and the Saeima by 21.0%. Trust indicators are summarised in Table 1.

Trust levels remain low for political parties – only 26.5% of the young people surveyed trusted political parties, but this is by 8.5 percentage points higher than the total population of Latvia. The relatively low level of young people’s trust in political parties can be linked to family and media attitudes, since a large percentage of young people have not had direct links with political parties. This is confirmed by the results of various forms of political participation – only 2.0% said they were currently a member of a political organisation, 2.5% said they had donated money to a political organisation over the last year, 3.0% said they had tried to contact a Saeima member, while 4.5% had tried to contact a local government member. It should also be noted that young people trust the European Union (68.0%) more often. This means that young people have developed their attitudes towards political parties at least partly on the basis of discussions with their relatives and information available in the media.

Table 1: Youth levels of trust in public institutions and others, 2021

	Trust completely	Rather trust	Rather distrust	Distrust completely	Hard to say
Government (Cabinet of Ministers)	7.5%	35.0%	24.0%	17.0%	16.0%
Saeima	4.0%	33.0%	32.5%	14.5%	16.0%
President	5.5%	37.5%	23.5%	13.5%	20.0%
Political parties	2.0%	24.5%	38.5%	16.0%	18.5%
Judicial system	10.0%	46.5%	20.0%	8.5%	14.5%
European Union	17.5%	50.5%	11.5%	5.5%	14.0%
Teachers	14.5%	64%	11.5%	2.5%	6.5%
Relatives	49.0%	39.5%	2.0%	2.5%	6.0%
Mairis Briedis (boxer)	14.0%	15.5%	19.0%	22.0%	27.0%
Maija Armaņeva (influencer)	2.5%	8.0%	23.5%	31.0%	33.5%
Paula Freimane (influencer)	3.0%	12.0%	25.0%	27.5%	31.0%
Renārs Zeltiņš (influencer)	7.5%	15.0%	23.5%	22.0%	30.5%

Source: made by the author according to gathered data of a questionnaire that was completed between 25 October and 7 November 2021.

Young people are more likely to trust the Latvian boxer Mairis Briedis (14.0%) than the government (7.5%), the Saeima (4.0%), the President of Latvia (5.5%), political parties (2.0%), and the judicial system (10.0%).⁸ They said they trusted the boxer almost as often as their educators (14.5%), but they did not show the same levels of trust in other famous people and influencers. A significant proportion of young people in a number of cases could not give a specific response to trust in national regulatory bodies or famous individuals.

The qualitative study in the focus group discussions strived to gain a deeper understanding on some of the issues covered in the survey. In response to the first group of questions regarding internal policy issues, pupils showed a reasonably good understanding of basic facts about in-

⁸ Regarding confidence in the judicial system in Latvia, 56.5% of the young respondents said they tended to trust it, while at national level this rate is significantly lower standing at 39%. The lack of trust in political parties could be one of the explanations why only 2.0% of the young people surveyed are involved in political organisations or are members of party youth organisations.

ternal politics, i.e., how the parliament and the executive branch work.⁹ Surprisingly, pupils showed an even better understanding about some foreign policy issues, most notably the European Union and the European Parliament.¹⁰

When discussing the importance of media in their lives, 10th grade pupils admitted that they had little interest in political news. They showed no interest in following politicians on social media, nor did they share or comment on the content online. All groups expressed their concerns about the objectivity of media and information that social media “imposes on users”. Most had little interest in consuming political news on a daily basis, saying that they used news portals only to acquire information when necessary. Some pupils even said they were following foreign politicians on social media, but not Latvian ones. Contrary to 10th graders and 11th graders, 12th grade pupils said they discussed topics of interest with their friends rather than their family members.

In response to the question of what could improve their civic interests and political participation, the pupils revealed that the lack of informa-

⁹ 10th grade pupils were able to define that the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia is the parliament that passes laws and consists of 100 members that are elected in open and fair elections; they were also able to determine that their actions are regulated by the Constitution, and the Saeima Order Roll. They also knew that in order to be elected to the Saeima, parties need to overcome the 5% threshold in the elections. 11th graders were more expressive in their views. Even though they knew many of the facts, they also expressed the opinion that the Saeima consists of “fools and money-grabbers”. 12th graders demonstrated in general a much deeper understanding about how the Saeima works, knew in more detail the operations of coalition and opposition parties, when they meet, how sessions are organised and how laws are passed. They were aware of the fact that there are independent MPs. In response to a question about the Cabinet of Ministers, 10th grade pupils also showed general knowledge about its authority that it is the highest executive body, and that it is responsible for the government’s policies. 11th graders said that the Cabinet of Ministers was the same as the Saeima’s “crusaders”, but were “slightly different fools working there”. They were able to identify the Prime Minister and many of the ministers by name.

¹⁰ When asked questions about the European Union, 10th grade pupils also showed extensive knowledge about EU history – in that it was initially created after World War II; that it consists of 27 Member States, and that now it attempts to set common development objectives, with human rights being mentioned as a key criterion. Pupils stressed that the European Union gave young people a wide array of opportunities, such as the freedom to travel, to use a single currency etc. 11th graders knew many facts about the EU in greater detail than the 10th graders, e.g., they knew more about commissioners, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and the European Commission. In addition to what the 11th graders knew about the EU, 12th graders also could discuss EU issues in more detail, and knew the eight Latvian MEPs.

tion on the opportunities young people have to become more active is the most important aspect. They stressed the importance of civic education as it helps form “citizens”, and that access to information on the opportunities young people have would certainly lead to more civic activities on their part. 10th graders stressed that they lacked an understanding on how political decisions are made, saying that they would be willing to engage in politics if their rights were reduced in some way, e.g., something was “banned”, or access to information was reduced. They also proposed that a nationally designed phone application with information on laws, decisions, potential events, and statistics where information can be compared would help them understand politics.

11th grader political activity is shown in their regular use of *Manabals.lv*. They said they would be more interested in politics if it affected their personal lives or focused on issues that are important to them. They stressed that they would be politically more active if a “secure atmosphere” was created by adults, and they were more forthcoming in explaining political issues. 12th graders were more assertive in their attitudes about political participation, saying they would definitely continue to follow political issues and participate in the elections. Some pupils stressed that they were politically passive because they did not want to face criticism from friends and family. Just as the 10th graders, they said they would become more politically savvy if democratic values were threatened and there were dangers of totalitarianism taking over.

Conclusions

The question as to what would help bring youths back into politics remains elusive, because there is a difference between what the young people feel would help them become politically more active, and what would really make them politically active as citizens. The study showed that the role of the family remains important in the process of shaping young people’s beliefs. The unwillingness to be politically active expressed by some young people is largely related to the political apathy of their family, where there is a clear sign of isolation and unwillingness to engage in civic activities. On a positive note, youth confidence in government institutions and political parties is generally higher than that of Latvian residents, although it could be explained by the fact that they have little first-hand experience with them.

The study showed that a large proportion of mass media consumption is obtained through social media, followed by news portals, family and

friends' views. The biggest worry is that young people can potentially get into a “bubble” of certain information flows, which will not allow a wider flow of information in the long term and will polarise their views. For this reason, civic education remains extremely important – the study showed that youths had satisfactory levels of knowledge about public administration, internal policy issues, the role of state institutions, and foreign policy. But they had more interest in foreign policy combined with international institutions. The European Union in particular had significantly higher levels of credibility among young people than national policies, which according to the focus groups had to do with better availability of information. It is remarkable that young people show an interest in politics following foreign politicians, at European and global levels, but such practices do not apply to Latvia's internal policies. The young people mention the lack of information as a reason for their lack of engagement in local activities, saying that if information was widely available, interpretative, statistically justified, and which allowed them to form an understanding of the nature of decisions and laws, they would participate more. Whether that would really help bring Latvian youths back into politics remains to be seen.

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