

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION OF YOUTH IN LATVIA

Anita Stasulane
Daugavpils University

The author examines the political socialization of youth in Latvia on the basis of fieldwork that has been done in the EU Seventh Framework Programme research project “Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement.” The presentation is focused on “Latvia for Tibet”, with particular emphasis on patterns of socialization of today’s young people which considerably differ from the ones of their parents’ generation. They have been largely affected by the processes of globalisation, individualisation (Cf. Bauman, Z. (2009) ‘Identity in the Globalizing World’. In A. Elliot and P. Du Gay. *Identity in Question*, London: Sage, pp. 1-12.), and by consumption and competition (Cf. Kestilä-Kekkonen, E. (2009) ‘Anti-party sentiment among young adults’. In *Young*, 17 (2): pp. 145-165.). In the past, the older generation was the one which transferred traditions, values, customs, and worldviews to the younger generation. All this was ensured by the influence of agencies of socialization such as the family, religion, and the school. Today the impact of these institutions has been challenged and undermined by new forces, particularly by the internet and television. On the other hand, the results of this study show that parents still have some influence on the youth of “Latvia for Tibet”. The effectiveness of the parental socialization is stronger on political attitudes and ideological orientations, but at the same time, the peer socialization has more effect on the behaviours and on the political participation.

After summarizing the project results, it can be concluded that the level of activity of the youth of “Latvia for Tibet” in political and social processes of the country is average. The data show that a significant part of the respondents rarely becomes members of political parties and interest groups. They are less interested in politics; therefore, they assess their knowledge of political issues as being low. This trend is typical not only among the respondents of the group but also among young people of Latvia in general. This makes one to assume that, according to Norris’ statement (Norris, P. (2003) ‘Young People and Political Activism: From the Politics of Loyalties to the Politics of Choice?’ *Report for the Council of Europe Symposium*. November: 27-28.) currently young people are “either apathetic or alienated” from the political system. However, it is misleading to think that the young people of “Latvia for Tibet” are not interested in politics and are indifferent to its processes. According to some studies about civic participation of youth, young people in general are the ones most concerned about political and social issues (Harris, A., Wyn, J. and Younes, S. (2010) ‘Beyond apathetic or activist youth’, *Young*, 18 (1): 9-32.; O’Toole, T., Marsh, D. and Jones, S. (2003) ‘Political Literacy Cuts Both Ways: The Politics of Nonparticipation among Young People’, *The Political Quarterly*, 74 (3): 349-360.). The findings of the study on “Latvia for Tibet” support the idea that currently young people are more likely to be involved in other forms of social and political participation, the nature of which has changed among younger generations (Cf. Norris, P. (1999) *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*, New York: Oxford University Press.) The MYPLACE project study provides additional evidence that this generation is not “dropping out” of politics but instead of traditional forms young people are more interested in alternative forms of participation and engagement. Although the respondents of the study group associate elections with “active citizenship” and a minimum requirement in fulfilling one’s responsibilities as a citizen, it is not considered the only type of activity anymore which qualifies as citizenship behaviour (Saha, L. J. (2000) ‘Education and Active Citizenship: Prospects and Issues’, *Educational Practice and Theory*, 22(1): 9-20.). Another argument is that young people are most interested in participation in alternative (non-voting) political activities. The youth of “Latvia for Tibet” participate in protest campaigns, support the key ideas of the group, as well as express their opinions by signing various petitions regarding human rights violations in Tibet and worldwide. Therefore, according to the classification developed by Westheimer and Kahn (Westheimer, J., & Kahn, J. (2004) ‘What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy’, *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2): 237-269.), the young people of “Latvia for Tibet” can be classified as justice-oriented citizens, because they critically assess the causes of social problems, and work actively to alleviate them.

All these findings are consistent with other studies which suggest that loss of community ties, little interest in and knowledge of political processes, low levels of trust in politicians and growing cynicism of democratic institutions are often seen as indicators of the younger generation’s weakened sense of citizenship and political engagement (Cf. Haste, H. and Hogan, A. (2006) ‘Beyond conventional civic participation, beyond the moral-political divide: young people and contemporary debates about citizenship’, *Journal of Moral Education*, 35(4) : 473-493.; Dalton, R.J. (2008) ‘Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation’, *Political Studies*, 56(1) : 76-98. Stoker, G. (2006) ‘Explaining Political Disenchantment: Finding Pathways to Democratic Renewal’, *The Political Quarterly*, 77(2): 184-194.). Thus, through new forms of political participation, young people feel that they can influence political decisions more directly and effectively.

One of the most important findings arising from the MYPLACE study in the group and confirmed by works of other researchers is that most of today's young people in Europe grew up in society where consumption and competition are dominant ideologies whose basic principles are integrated into political participation (Kestilä-Kekkonen 2009). Due to this reason young people have a greater tendency to focus more on "quality of life" issues such as environmental protection and human rights (e. g. Harris, Wyn and Younes 2010). These changes favour more issue-specific for this purpose and campaign-like political action (Report on "Political Participation and EU Citizenship: Perceptions and Behaviours of Young People" 2013). In this case the group "Latvia for Tibet" is one of the organizations highlighting a problem not specific for Latvian society.

Despite the fact that findings of this study support the view that today young people have little trust and confidence in political parties and professional politicians, it does not mean that they have lost trust in democratic institutions, as well as in individuals and agencies representing them. However, the study data show that the young people of "Latvia for Tibet" want to participate in political processes and influence life in the country, as well as they believe that the democratic system exists in Latvia. Today young people view elections as one of the many opportunities, and exercise their political participation in various issue-specific ways that can potentially influence policies more directly. The youth of "Latvia for Tibet" consider the traditional forms of engagement insufficient to influence policy making in the areas important for young people, e.g. education and social welfare. There are similarities between the attitudes expressed on this issue by the respondents in this study and those described by other researchers (O'Toole, Marsh and Jones 2003, Harris, Wyn and Younes 2010). The youth of the group do not see, first, how the politicians elected by them represent their interests, and, second, that their views are listened to efficiently.

Another reason for insufficiency of political forms is the fact that understanding of young people about citizenship and political participation has changed. First, it becomes geographically more dispersed since modern youth can be members of several communities and merge local and global identities. Second, they are more individualistic and efficacy-driven than based on emotional and normative considerations.

It is not only the lack of belief in personal political efficacy that causes passivity of the young people in this group. In this respect it should be noted that Latvia, compared to other countries, still ranks among other post-Communist countries characterized by scepticism and low confidence in government institutions, low levels of political efficacy, little interest in politics, low levels of civic engagement, and associational membership (Mieriņa, I. (2011) Political Participation and Development of Political Attitudes in Post-communist Countries. Unpublished PhD Thesis.) which is one of the reasons for the low political activity of the youth of "Latvia for Tibet".