The role of internet discussions in promoting the civic participation of young people in Latvian case studies

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Abstract

Participation is an important aspect of youth policy both at national and the EU level. Studies conducted in Latvia as a post-Communist society show that the majority of young people have never taken part in political activities. A third of the youth are not involved in social and civic activities. At the same time, 76% of the youth admit that they have possibilities and willingness to join various thematic online discussion groups. In view of this participation data particular attention is paid to activating youth communication and involvement processes. Participation in various non-formal networks is particularly emphasized. Thus, preference is given to the participation forms which correspond to a particular lifestyle. Various internet discussions concerning citizenship-related situations facilitate the implementation of individualized civic participation and generally promote individuals' autonomy and increase the diversity of interests and opinions. The purpose of the article is to study and evaluate the theoretical insight in the potential of online communication and analyse the data obtained in particular case studies concerning the role of internet discussions in activating the civic participation of the youth in Latvia. Content analysis of the discussions in the online discussion list 'For Honest Politics' is presented. Results show that where participants come together in order to achieve a particular aim there is improvement the quality of civic participation.

Keywords: internet discussions, civic participation

Introduction

Participation is an important aspect of the youth policy both at the national and the European Union level. In view of the data concerning the shrinking participation of youth in political activities, in Latvia particular attention is paid to adapting various kinds and forms of participation. Generally, they play an important part in activating youth communication and involvement processes.

The studies conducted in Latvia as a post-Communist society show that the majority of young people (60%) have never taken part in social and civic activities. One third of the youth are not involved in social and civic activities. At the same time, 76% of the youth admit that they have possibilities and willingness to join various thematic online discussion groups (Youth in Latvia, 2008-2013). Participation in various non-formal networks is particularly emphasized. Thus, preference is given to the participation forms which correspond to a particular lifestyle. In this case, various internet discussions

concerning citizenship-related situations facilitate the implementation of individualized civic participation.

The purpose of the article is to study and evaluate the theoretical insight in the potential of online communication and analyse the data obtained in particular case studies concerning the role of internet discussions in activating the civic participation of the youth in Latvia.

1. Theoretical insight into the communication potential of the internet

The choice of the theme of the paper and its topicality is determined by the current situation in the world and in Latvia in particular. The number of internet users who make use of the new opportunities of online communication in order to engage both in political and private communication is increasing every year. It is considered that the new opportunities provided by the internet, which allows young people opportunity to offer new ideas, exchange opinions, reach a consensus, promote these ideas to the authorities in order to get them accepted, give unprecedented impulse for quality development within the public sphere (Froomkin, 2004; Gripsrud, 2009). The impact of the internet on the public sphere is also related to the views of Habermas that 'the realization of the principles of political pluralism needs informal flow of communication from the public spheres which are open to all political forces and citizens' (Habermas, 1996, p. 171).

Several studies carried out in traditional Western democracies show that the people who read more newspapers, watch TV and surf the Net are also more knowledgeable, trust the government more and participate in political processes (Norris, 2000; Pavilk, 2008). It is an important correlation – the more frequently an individual uses mass media, the more actively he/she can participate in online discussions. Therefore, public communication platforms offered to citizens via the internet can expand the opportunities for democracy and activate youth participation (Shane, 2004; Mossberger, 2008).

The processes of civic participation tend to become more active at the time of topical events. Undoubtedly, this is facilitated by the internet. It gives an opportunity for each individual to express his/her attitude directly and immediately, as well as to voice his/her opinion (Pavlik, 2008). Thus the internet can revive the public sphere as the 'horizontal' communication of citizens. An online discussion is a public discussion on the themes that refer to certain policy issues as well as broader interests or values. It provides 'a significant volume of democracy and politicalness, especially in polarized societies. The public discussion takes place in the public sphere – the virtual space formed by all public communication devoted to political issues. There are various types of discourse in the public sphere. The diversity of discourse reflects the variety of views, experiences and the kinds of speech. A public discussion is a political method by means of which communication of the diversity of discourses takes place in a democratic way' (Witschge, 2008, p. 77).

Like elsewhere in the democratic world, heated debates concerning the sense of online discussions have been going on in Latvia for several years; to what extent individuals

and groups can have an impact on social and political processes by communicating their ideas through the internet; to what extent the anonymity of online discussions degrades their quality and reduces the possibility that the citizens expressing their views through the internet will be heard by the authorities?

2. The research material and methods

The authors of the article carried out the analysis of online discussions related to readers' comments in the most popular news portal 'Delfi' concerning articles about a protest activity held in Riga, in the Dome Square (hereinafter 'Old Riga riot'). We analysed 410 comments of the most active commentators referring to 12 articles (www.delfi.lv/temas/13 janvara-grautini). We had an opportunity to observe the openness of online discussions among the youth not only as academic readers, but also as educators in their actual teaching practice. The aforementioned comments were analysed in the workshops of the course 'Constitutional Rights' when studying themes concerning human rights and civic institutions, which gave an opportunity to hear students' public opinions as well.

In the present research, the authors have mainly used the case study method. The case study method makes it possible to study the complexity of each situation and the mutual interaction of its separate elements and manifestations. 'On the one hand, the case study method is the study of the particularity and complexity of one case in order to evaluate its process under the influence of essential conditions' (Stake, 1995); on the other hand, it allows researchers to look at separate cases in a wider context. This is due to the possibilities of 'free' interpretation of different data.

It has to be noted that the materials of online discussions referred to events that took place in the Latvian political environment at the beginning of 2009. They were brought about by the 'thoughtless' announcement of the Latvian government at the end of 2008 that they were forced to borrow money from international financial institutions in order to ensure payments from the national budget. At that time, Latvia and Hungary were the only European countries that dealt with the consequences of the global financial crisis in that way. The international lenders' demand to ensure immediate budget consolidation led to the government decisions to increase taxes and reduce spending in the public sector. This brought about deep discontent in the society.

The organization 'Society for Different Politics', which represented the opposition, announced that they were going to organize a protest demonstration in the Dome Square in Riga. The choice of the date for this demonstration was quite symbolic. On 13th January 1905, the so-called '1905 revolution' started in Riga, which is one of the most well-known events in the Latvian history. The revolution was violently crushed by the Russian Imperial authorities. Apart from that, 13th January 1991 was the date when massive protest rallies started in Riga against the use of Soviet military force in order to disperse demonstrations in Lithuania. The events of 13th January 1991 started the so-called 'period of barricades' in the three Baltic States, which tried to break away from the collapsing Soviet Union. Therefore, a question arises whether the choice of the date for the demonstration was an indirect encouragement for people to engage in some more

active forms of protest. The comments referring to the online articles informing about the forthcoming 'Old Riga riot' in the portal 'Delfi' were varied. All in all, 25% of the texts could be classified as being 'against the authority', i.e. a quarter of all the comments, while 39 comments were targeted 'against the political opposition'. Emotional and abstract appeals dominated. However, there were also claims using rational arguments that questioned the legitimacy of the political power. Let us have a look at some most characteristic opinions.

First of all, many participants of the online discussions concerning the 'Old Riga riot' appreciated the role of the internet as an alternative to official practices of political participation (58%). For instance, in one comment we can read:

> There is nothing shameful about the fact that the world will see that the people of Latvia are against the ruling clique, which is 100% corrupt. Nothing can be done about it. There is no point in hiding it. It will just make the matters worse. It is better that everybody sees that we are AGAINST!!

Respondent 3 says:

> We do not have leaders who are promoted, accepted and elected. Whoever is more confident becomes a leader. And he can lead only in one area, in some others he may be incompetent, and he will listen to other people.

Respondent 18 points out the short duration of online discussions as a positive factor as far as the mobilization of the society is concerned; in contrast, joining a political party or some NGO implies long-term obligations that nobody wants to undertake. He also notes: 'I am not a member of any party or organization, and I do not want to join them since any discipline would inconvenience me. I have my own opinion, and I can express it in this way.'

Respondent 45 draws attention to the unique situation, in his opinion, that the anonymous space of online discussions has been relatively free from the attempts to form some artificial public opinion:

> Next day after the revolution I saw that the themes were different, that there had appeared those opinion formers. Before that it was obvious that those [hired public opinion influencers] were desperately writing. However, at some point all that preparation for the 'Umbrella revolution', the demands to dissolve the parliament became interesting and advantageous for all sides.

The participants of online discussion groups (42%) are also dissatisfied with the activity and potential of the non-governmental sector. They emphasize its inability to reach definite political goals. Therefore, their attitude to joining political parties is negative or at least sceptical. The main arguments are as follows: this kind of activity would be 'compromising' them, and the society 'demands honest, non-party policy'.

The analysis of the respondents' comments leads to the conclusion that the elaboration of particular documents mobilizes the participants of online discussion groups to start

discussions aimed at reaching the goals that will impress mass media. There are wide discussions concerning: 1) the civic aims of the discussion group; 2) the political mechanisms of reaching these aims; 3) the matters of editorial nature, after a consensus concerning mechanisms, i.e. a public petition to the politicians, has been reached. The formulation of goals and agreement concerning the mechanisms of achieving them as the topics of discussions, as well as the proportion of such texts in the discussion group are essential indicators of the quality of discussions. The searching for aims is vividly illustrated by a quotation from the comment written by respondent 63:

> At one point it seemed to me that our multi-level arguments (actually, it is difficult to call them a discussion) resulted from the fact that each of us lives on a different floor, but then I realized that perhaps the situation was much simpler – we live in different houses, which is only natural, i.e. there is a house that wants to have a long-term impact on political processes. On the other hand, there is a house that does not want to have a long-term impact on anything that is not their profession or hobby, but they are ready to communicate and act if they feel that at that particular moment their non-professional support is needed.

In the discussion space, there can be observed progression towards agreement concerning common achievable goals. 120 comments contain an appeal for particular action. Depending on the views of the debater, the aim of the appeal is different. The majority of the commentators can be regarded as the supporters of violent forms of protest. Seven out of ten commentators whose comments have been analysed are in favour of violence at least in one comment. Calls for violence or supporting violent forms of protest or, on the contrary, supporting the use of violent methods to repress the protestors – can be observed. Some typical examples are as follows: 'But how? How else if not by force? Definitely not with songs. They don't give a damn about songs or dances.' (Respondent 8)

Even though the content analysis of the online discussions concerning the 'Old Riga riot' generally show a low level of rationality, the authors of the comments believe that the online discussion is the environment that facilitates the reaching of political goals. Respondent 40 has pointed out:

> We definitely persuade each other. That's why we are there. There are some smart mouths that come with their own position, but the majority are able to listen to others. And by exchanging opinions we reach a consensus. Those who are not interested in social life do not usually join us.

It has already been pointed out that rationality is the criterion by means of which in the pluralistic public sphere there can be measured the correspondence of particular public sub-spheres to the ideal of the public sphere formulated by Habermas. One characteristic feature of it is rationally critical debate on political issues. In order to ensure participation in political decision-making, the key precondition of the public sphere is free, rationally critical debate open to any participant, where consensus about the opinion discussed can be reached without pressure, by means of rational arguments, by harmonizing opinions and formulating a rational goal. The aggregate of these features could be called the quality of the debate.

In the comments concerning the 'Old Riga riot', emotional arguments predominate. Even in the model of the pluralistic public sphere, there are few features that would allow us to consider it as the space for exchanging high quality ideas. Out of 27 active debaters, the content created by six persons could not be included at all in the research data as these texts had nothing to do with the theme of the debate, or they were openly rude and vulgar. The texts created by ten other participants were characterised by high proportion of rude lexis and emotional elements not focused on harmonizing opinions and formulating goals.

An essential criterion for evaluating online discussions is the use of the internet as the means of communication. In several comments there is a reference to information obtained from the internet or internet communication, for instance:

> Now in all the links we can see the copy-pasted appeal of Balta Tava to meet in all their addresses – if people follow these appeals, it can lead to serious changes in the relations between the authority and society. This is the best possible facebook, feedback with the voters – meet your representative and tells him straight out what you think.

Overall, the understanding of the participants of online discussions referring to the 'Old Riga riot' of the opportunities of new communication technologies was positive. The internet was used as an asynchronous communication environment. Moreover, the authors of the comments were familiar with the opportunities of the internet hypertextuality, sharing information, as well as perceiving the internet as the channel of social mobilization. This manifested itself in the appeals to write the petition or to get together and join the protest rally.

During the research, several other aspects of the studied issue were singled out. When comparing case studies and the results obtained from their analysis, it can be concluded that the progression towards achieving political goals is successful in those cases when the quality of communication in the discussion group as well as the communicative competencies of its participants are high. Both the representatives of 'Delfi' commentators and students believe that the participants have convinced one another, definite goals have been achieved, and the discussion has given them an opportunity to become organized.

Comparing the conclusions drawn from the analysis of particular cases, it can be concluded that all the discussions as the models of certain practices play a significant role in the public sphere in Latvia. However, in each particular case it was determined by different factors. Online discussion groups were important due to their focus on the goal, argumentation, rationality and critical attitude, which would not have been possible if the discussions had been taking place in any other way without the new communication possibilities provided by the internet. The online discussions give any computer user an opportunity to join them. This significantly expands the idea of the public sphere even if the particular case cannot be characterised as having high quality. One common factor that unites all the online discussions is their marked 'outsidedness' compared to the usual practices of civic communication. As far as the NGO sector is concerned, there is

pointed out its inability to achieve definite political goals. The connection with political parties is regarded as 'compromising'. Supposedly, the society demands 'honest, non-party policy'. Thus, there is emphasized 'dissociation' from political forces representing both the position and opposition. Quite often the authors of online comments tend to generalize and associate themselves with the 'people', i.e. with the aggregate of Latvian citizens.

Conclusions

1. The present research leads to the conclusion that in Latvia the internet as the medium of communication promotes people's involvement in exchanging different opinions. The engagement of a significant part of the participants of online discussions in the exchange of opinions confirms the prediction of theoreticians that in post-Communist states the communication opportunities provided by the internet renew the democratization of the political sphere in a positive way.
2. The citizens get more opportunities of real civic participation – especially individualized opportunities. This is also an opportunity to renew the public sphere as 'the horizontal communication of citizens'.
3. A lot of participants among the debaters join those discussions which have a specific aim more and more actively. Discussions on abstract matters are becoming less frequent. In the interviews, the representatives of the debaters admit that the discussions 'peter out' if they do not have a definite mobilizing goal.
4. Overall, online discussions also significantly improve the civic participation skills of young people in Latvia as a post-Communist state with insufficiently developed political society.
5. Online discussions ensure the freedom of choice for expressing different opinions; provide opportunities for the time and space of participation as well as for setting various goals and determining the ways of achieving them.
6. The quality of civic participation is improved by those online discussions whose participants come together in order to achieve specific goals.

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