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Involvement in the Democratic Life in Europe: A Study on Views and Vision of Youth in Latvia

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Abstract

Currently, the educational system in Latvia is undergoing a transition from a traditional to a competence-based curriculum where civic education plays an important place in pupils' holistic development. In the context of strengthening civic education, it is important to gain experience in practising citizenship in order to promote the active participation and co-responsibility of young people in social and political processes in the country and beyond. The study focuses on the factors that influence the formation of young Latvian people's civic identity and the role of formal education and their teachers in this process in a broader sustainability context.

The article reflects the results of a study about Latvian youngsters' involvement in political activities, their attitude and interest about political events in Latvia and the European Union.

Key words: youth, citizenship, civic identity, social responsibility, interest in politics

Introduction

2020 was a year of several anniversaries in Latvia – 30 years have passed since the approval of the Declaration of Independence of Latvia and 100 years since the approval of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia. 2020 marks the 70th anniversary of the European Union, Latvia has joined the European Union in 2004. Year 2022 is announced as a year of youth that places an emphasis on providing renewed opportunities to youth to become active citizens and promoters of political change.

Youth is an indicator of the vitality of a nation, its presence and future (CSORL, 2014). Any democratic society is based on the principles of participatory democracy, and a dialogue between people and decision makers. Active citizenship requires people to be involved and play an active role. This is a commitment to the well-being of a society. An active citizen is aware of the events of local and international scale, makes informed decisions and responds to events individually and collectively. The question about which competencies an active citizen needs to possess is complex and multidimensional. Youth survey, conducted in 2021 by the European Public Affairs among 18,156 young people from 16 to 30 years old, indicate that young people are interested in discussing politics with their peers. 87 % of them have engaged in at least one of the social or political activities (EP, 2021).

According to Johnson (2017), students' civic identity encompasses knowledge, attitudes, values, and actions regarding civic engagement. The question of civic identity has become more topical because the definition of citizenship today includes a range of dimensions and even conflicting aspects (Eränpalo, 2014). According to Hall (1992), identity is an ongoing production that keeps changing in relation to the stimuli coming from the environment. Identity can also be thought of as the more stable part of the self, whereas environmental stimuli are approached by changing one's role to fit each situation.

Youth citizenship development needs to be seen in a wider sustainable context (Salīte, 2008; Salīte, 2015; Fedosejeva et al., 2009; Heasly & Ilisko, 2021; Iliško, 2021). Citizenship education requires promotion of a deep and comprehensive understanding of the interdependence of the world and its citizens, on the basis of which coherent actions and policies can be developed, as well as a sustainable vision for a more equitable world. Education makes a considerable difference. Citizenship education needs to involve diverse stakeholders and should be recognized as an important tool among policy-makers in the context of sustainable development. For this to happen, the capacity of civil society is to find new partners and innovative ways of work. In a new competence-based approach, citizenship education aims at enlarging young people's understanding of key issues: globalization, sustainable development, values and beliefs, social justice, conflict resolution, informed, active, and responsible citizenship. The universal values and attitudes of young people will be supported and strengthened by active participation in building a better and just world.

Johnson (2017) suggests that civic identity development has five positions: 1) awareness, 2) exploration (What I do), 3) commitment (Who do I want to be), 4) commitment (Who I am), 5) Integration (Who I am). Johnson (2017) argues that the process of civic identity formation is grounded in participants' experiences. Identity conceptualizes development as occurring across three dimensions: epistemological (meaning-making capacity), intrapersonal (sense of self), and interpersonal (relationships with others). Eränpalo (2014) comments that civic identity is created from the relation between the individual and the community. A positive civic identity requires an ability to think critically and to feel empathy. In order to achieve this, the development and strengthening of civic identity require active reflection, experimentation and practice (Hart et al., 2011; Crocetti et al., 2012).

If the question is approached from the perspective of an active citizen's competences, activity can be determined from the perspective of knowledge, skills, attitudes and conscious action. The concept can also be expanded by the attachment of new dimensions, such as encountering, caring, involvement and identity. Activity can especially be seen in involvement (Rapeli, 2010, cited from Eränpalo (2014)). Active citizenship can also be determined through civic identity. In addition to their families, for many young people school is their only established long-term community. According to Eränpalo (2014), civic identity can therefore be considered a kind of group identity. Belonging to a group divides individuals into 'us' and 'others. According to Bauman (2002) and Makarevičs and Iliško (2019), this is essential in building group identity.

A positive civic identity requires an ability to think critically and to feel empathy. In order to achieve this, the development and strengthening of civic identity require active reflection, experimentation and practice (Hart et al., 2011; Crocetti et al., 2012).

The impact of education on the development of one's civic identity is seen as a key issue. What is widely discussed is what kind of civic society is wanted, to generate

response among children and young people. School offers adequate information for active citizenship from the perspective of civic education. The studies show that young people's interest in civic matters is declining (Kerr et al., 2010). For the development of a democratic society, it is essential that a citizen is critical and conscious, and aims for changes in the society (Kiilakoski et al., 2012, cited from Eränpalo (2014)).

Civic participation is one of six components in educational curricula, which focuses on describing the interconnections at the local, national and global levels, and explains one's involvement in multifaceted processes and the consequences of one's actions. That person undertakes responsibility, offers ideas and is actively involved in solving problems important for the society. The person participates in activities based on his/her own values and respects the values of others (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019).

The Purpose and Context of the Study

The research focuses on identity formation and involvement in social and political participation of youth. One can find controversial interpretations in this regard. Similar research on this topic highlights that young people are alienated from the state structures and display a negative attitude towards state structures and distrust to political parties. Participation of youth in elections is low and irregular. Other findings indicate that youth are not interested in participation in politics. However, they are among the ones who are concerned about political issues (Peipiņa, 2015). According to the data provided by the Ministry of Education in 2018, only 20 % or each fifth Latvian young person who is in the age group from 18 until 30 is actively involved in politics and wants to get involved in it (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017, 59). The survey is conducted within the framework of the project *Clicking with Voters*, which is implemented under the EC *Europe for Citizens* programme.

This study focuses on four main research questions: 1) How do we promote youngsters' interest about the political events in Latvia and European Union? 2) What are the views of Latvian youngsters related to themselves as the EU citizen identity? 3) What are the perspectives of young people about the EU development? 4) What is the understanding of young people and their responsibility for democratic processes in the EU?

The results of the study will be presented in four sections according to these research questions.

Design of the Study and Data Collection

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in this research (Creswell, 2003). The questionnaire was designed and administered by the EU project *Clicking with Voters* partners. As a part of theoretical study, eleven publications and reports from the Internet and mass media were analysed. They provide information about youth activities in the cities and regions of Latvia in 2018, as well as on the issues of concern to young people. The questionnaire consists of four parts. Part one contains information about the respondents' demographic data such as gender, age, level of education, socio-professional status, and interests about political events. Part two, entitled *European Identity*, presents an opportunity to explore youngsters' views related to their knowledge about the EU, to assess a future of the EU. Part three of the questionnaire *Freedom of movement within Europe* focuses on study of youth' opinion related to the possibilities

for European citizens to work in other European countries and their attitude to the rights of immigrants. The last section of the questionnaire entitled *The European Parliament Elections* focuses on young peoples' interest about the EU and importance of EP elections in the country, the main reasons why people vote and why people do not participate in the EU elections, and the themes that should be discussed as a priority during the electoral campaign. The questionnaire contains fourteen multiple-choice questions and ten questions with total of fifty-five statements assessed in a four-point Likert's measurement scale that ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

The questionnaire was developed by the project partners and was translated into Latvian. It was carried out in the e-setting during a time frame from October until November 2018. More than 50 e-mails were sent to Latvia's secondary and vocational schools' administration representatives and/or teachers and they were encouraged to distribute it to their students. The questionnaire was sent to more than 200 Daugavpils University students too.

Research Findings

The participants represent all historical and cultural regions in Latvia: Latgale, Vidzeme, Kurzeme, and Zemgale. The questionnaire data were obtained in an electronic form. Participation was voluntary. All teachers were informed about the aim of the study and the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses prior to the administration of the questionnaire. Youngsters (N = 334; 28 % males, 72 % females) from Latvia were questioned. 72 % of the respondents were 17–18 years old; 20 % – were 19–22 years old, and 8 % were 23–30 years old. Most of them were secondary or vocational school or university students (90.5 %). There were 6.5 % employers and 2.8 % unemployed respondents.

Level of education: 51 % or half of all respondents have primary, 36.3 % – have secondary education, and 6.5 % have vocational education. Bachelor's and Master's degrees comprise 2.8 % and 1.6 % of respondents respectively.

Contemporary society is characterized by digitally mediated interactions and activities, especially through social media. Findings show that 97 % of respondents use the internet every day, but 2.3 % use the internet often. Majority of youth are more interested in a sphere of entertainment rather than political issues.

Youngsters' Interest in Political Events in Latvia and European Union: The State of Arts

The interest of youth in the political life in Latvia can be related to the upcoming events in the EU, including the EU elections. Only one-fourth of youth participate actively in diverse social activities, for example, sports and volunteer work. In the research carried out by the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia "Youth monitoring 2017," every fifth of young persons took place in this research. In comparison with 2015, participation in political activities has decreased up to 9 % (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017, 59). Young people, who do not participate in activities on a regular basis, can be divided into two groups. Approximately half of the group has never shown any interest to be a part of political life, the other group of participants were busy and had no time for that, since the field of politics is not their priority (Jasjuļaņeca, 2018).

Publications in the press and interviews provided the answer to why the political interest of youth is so low.

Youth mature quicker, they postpone such significant events as family life to a later time (CSORL, 2014, 16). They think that political processes do not influence their life, therefore they do not undertake responsibility in their life and depend on their parents financially. They have no motivation to participate in elections or join political parties. For example, in the 13th parliament elections in 2018 only 12.9 % of participant candidatures were in the age group from 21 to 30 (CEC, 2018). Due to the influence of mass media, young people often have a negative connotation regarding politics, since politics is associated with corruption, and scandals that result in a distrust of political parties and state institutions (Peipiņa, 2015). Youth has developed a misunderstanding towards political fights among political parties before elections, the unclear position of political parties in one or other position, and a lack of positive examples among the politicians (Miezaine, 2001). Politicians are not interested in issues that are interesting to youth such as quality of education, unemployment and political participation.

The activity of youth to a large degree was influenced by their parents and teachers with the aim to foster youth interest in political issues. For example, in 2018, pupils from Daugavpils (N = 55) "*We and politics,*" 56 % of participants emphasized that TV and mass media are among the channels that influence their thinking, 25 % of participants believe that their parents believe in the state politics. They can influence politics by speaking in English, by participating in political events, in sports, by taking part in dance festivals, by conducting scientific work and promoting their schools' achievements beyond Latvia. The majority want to participate in nature protection activities thus influencing the educational process, but one-fourth of the participants do not want to participate anywhere. According to Eriksen (2010), the atmosphere in schools becomes better when diversity is approached through shared activities and discussions, rather than through the pursuit of shared values and similarity. This also leads to accepting diversity and different opinions.

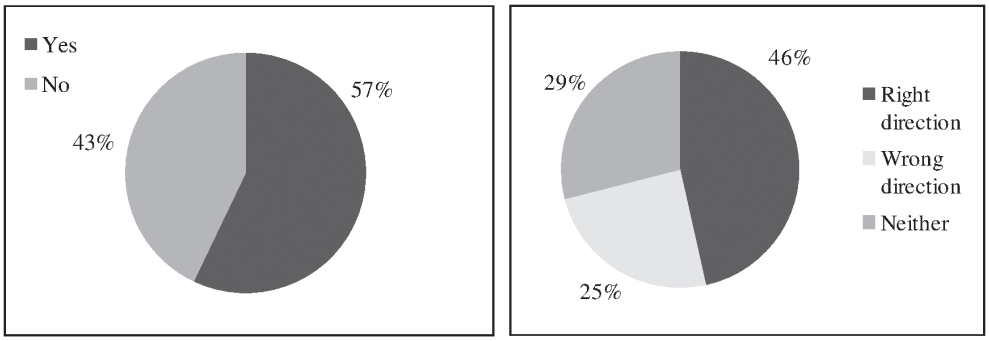
Each year about 20 thousand of young people gain the right to vote in Latvia but they do not believe in the power of their voice. Therefore, schools need to foster political interest among young people. Political activity of youth is still low (Semjonova, 2018). In 2018, a number of seminars were organized for the teachers of social sciences and politics about how to foster youth political activity. Since 2016, the seminars called *"Coffee with the politicians"* have been organized by and for young people. This method was adopted from Sweden and was piloted in Latvia. The aim of the meeting is to foster a dialogue between the Parliament members, heads of schools and municipalities that provides ground for the youth to ask questions, to hear the opinion of others and to create new ideas and solutions. For example, the high school students from Madona (Latvia) displayed their interest to explore the attitude of politicians by participating in the debates about participation of youth in politics and other topical issues. This is a solid ground from which to believe that youth is interested in politics and that they are ready to talk and participate if they are offered such opportunities. Initiative should come from both, the state and municipality, as well from the NGO sector. Traditional democracy and its mechanisms are quite heavy and slow for politicians and state governors. One needs to take into account the rhythm and possibilities of contemporary youth.

The data from this study shows that 65.6 % of respondents agree with the statement: "My voice counts in the EU," but 34.4 % deny it. 59 % of respondents are interested in European affairs; 41 % – do not have any interests.

57 % of respondents consider that learning about the EU is a part of their education, but 43 % deny it. 46 % of respondents think that things are going in the right direction in the EU. 25 % think that things are going wrong and 29 % do not know (see Figure 1). The distribution of responses largely coincides with the results of the previous studies.

Figure 1

Respondents' Assessment of the EU and the Politics of EU

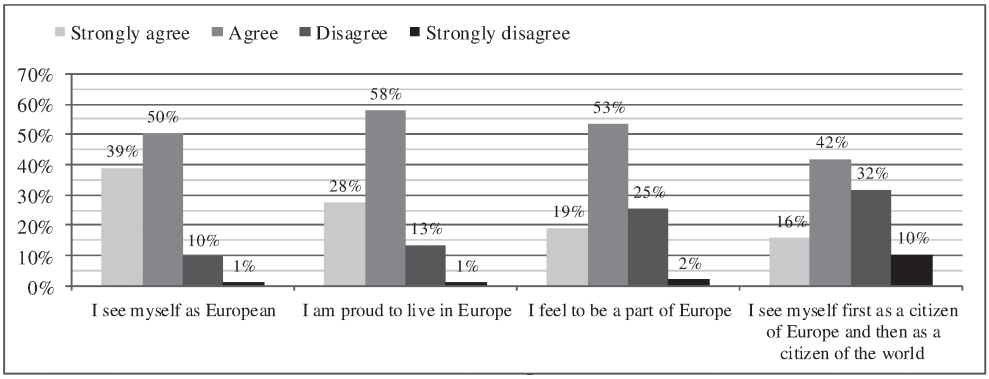


Latvian Youngsters' Views Related to Their Identity as the EU Citizens

Research findings show that the majority of surveyed youngsters acknowledge their affiliation and belonging to the European community. Figure 2 indicates a more detailed distribution. About 90 % of Latvia's youngsters identify themselves as European, 85 % are proud to live in Europe. 72 % – feel to be a part of Europe, but only 57 % see themselves first as citizens of Europe and afterward as citizens of the world.

Figure 2

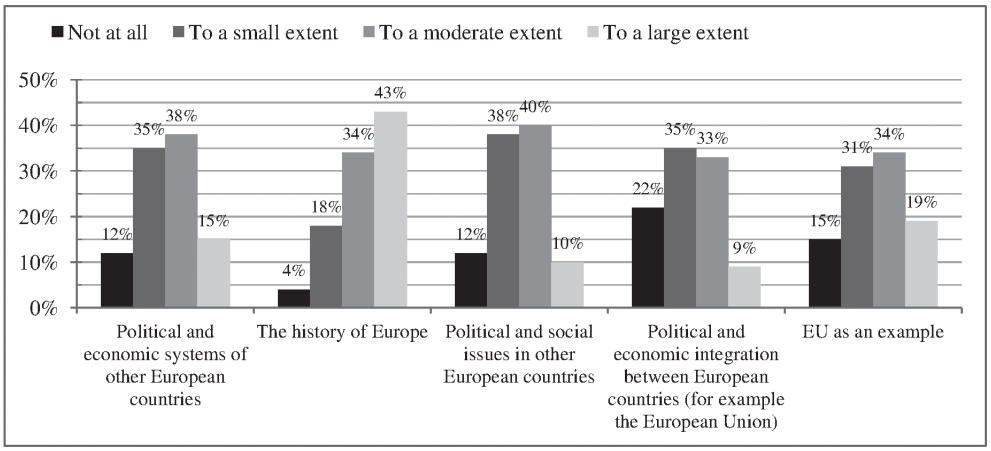
Assessment of Youngsters About Themselves as European Citizens



Majority of participants had an opportunity to a large or moderate extent to learn about the political and economical system of the European Union (53 %), 12 % did not have such an opportunity, and 35 % had some opportunity (see Figure 3). About 77 % of participants have acknowledged that they have some opportunities to learn about the history of the European Union, but 4 % did not have such an opportunity. About 42 % of participants indicated that they had such an opportunity to learn about the political and economic integration of the EU, 23 % did not have such an opportunity.

Figure 3

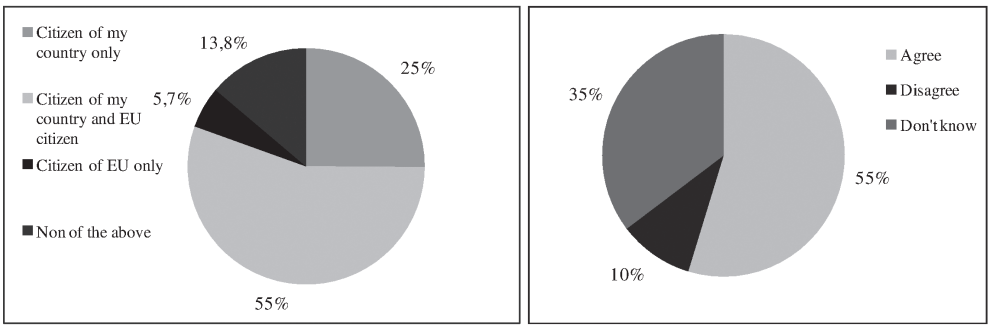
Youngsters' Assessment of Their Opportunity to Learn About EU



In exploring one's identity, 25 % of youth identify themselves as a citizen of their country but 55 % – both as citizens of their countries and as EU citizens (see Figure 4). Likewise, 55 % of respondents agree that European identity doesn't deny national identities, but 35 % informed that they do not know.

Figure 4

Youngsters Assessment About Their Identity as European Citizens and Their European Identity



The evaluation of youth about the EU in general is positive. More than 87 % of young people acknowledge that ES guarantees human rights, more than 70 % think that EU ensures safe environment, 81 % think that ES takes care of the environment, 78 % think that ES is good for the economy of certain countries and 78 % positively evaluates the usefulness of ES because of legislation. 57 % of respondents acknowledged that "Economy and growth" as the main theme should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections.

More than 80 % of Latvian youth strongly agree with all statements about cooperation between EU countries except the three about the necessity of a European army for peace-keeping missions, to combat illegal entry from non-European countries and to offer a shelter for the refugees. Youth are concerned about a clean environment, economic development and employment, as well as ratification of educational qualifications.

Freedom of Movement Within Europe and Cooperation

About 90 % of youth accept that allowing citizens of European countries to work anywhere in Europe is good for the European economy and citizens of European countries should be allowed to work anywhere in Europe. Majority disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements:

1) citizens of European countries should be allowed to work in another European country only if their skills are needed there (66 %);
2) citizens of the European countries who wish to work in another country should be allowed to take only the jobs that no one in the other country wants to do (66 %) and
3) only a limited number of people should be allowed to move for work from one European country to another (68 %). So, they support the same rights for all workers of the EU.

Latvian youth is cautious and optimistic about the cooperation between European countries in strengthening democracy and their future. The dominant answer is "likely" except the one: only 35 % of respondents think that the air and water position become low. 60 % of participants think that there is closer cooperation between European countries in strengthening democracy. 65 % think about the influence of China and the USA and emerging threats of terrorism. Youth acknowledges the need of cooperation among partner countries to fight terrorism and illegal immigration.

Youth are concerned the economic development of Europe countries: 50 % of young people think about the slowdown of the economy, they are concerned about increasing poverty and unemployment.

Latvian youth is a little cautious and optimistic about their own future. The majority of them hope that they will be able to find a job they like: (83 %), that their financial situation will be better (80 %) in comparison with their parents' situation, that they will earn enough, will be able to travel (80 %) and will establish their own family (84 %).

Youngsters' Assessment of Participation in the European Parliament Elections

Citizens of Latvia and citizens of other European Union member states residing in Latvia and entered into the Population Register of Latvia and the Electoral Register of Latvia had the right to elect the European Parliament. To participate in elections a voter on Election Day had to be at least 18 years old. About 33.5 per cent of Latvian citizens participated in the European Parliament elections in 2019, the activity of all voters registered for voting abroad was significantly higher – 91 percent. In comparison with the European Parliament elections of 2014, voter turnout increased by 3.3 percentage points (CEC, 2019). However, voter turnout is mediocre. According to the results of this research, the main five reasons why people vote in the EU elections are:

1) they can change things by voting in EP elections (53 %),
2) it is their duty as citizens (46 %),
3) they want to express their discontent (38 %),
4) they want to express dissatisfaction with the EU (29 %),
5) they want to support the EU (15 %).

The main five reasons why people do not vote in the EU elections are:

1) they believe their vote will not change anything (75 %),
2) they are not interested in politics, or in election generally (46 %),
3) they distrust the political system (40 %),
4) they do not know where and how to vote (18 %),
5) they have no time (15 %).

The themes that should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections from youngsters' point of view are:

1) economy and growth (57 %),
2) combating the youth unemployment (38 %),
3) fight against terrorism (36 %),
4) combating the youth unemployment (28 %),
5) immigration (29 %).

Youngsters assess the importance of youngsters in the political process. About 84 % of youngsters accept the role of new political parties and movements are having success by protesting against the traditional political establishment. They believe that new political parties and movements can find new solutions better.

Over the last years, one can see evidence of a significant drop in youth political participation. Young people are not active voters in elections, they are quite passive participants in political activities. They express distrust of the governmental institutions. This might be explained by the use of traditional forms of involvement of youth in the political life of the country. Youth leaders need to be open to various ways of involvement of youth in politics, like participation in flash mob activities, political involvement on digital platforms, and world coffee workshops with the politicians. Active participation in politics means rights and opportunities for young people to participate and influence decisions and engage in activities to foster a sustainable world. This means the need for young people is a significant sector of the society whose voice needs to be considered significant and powerful in making the world a better place in which to live.

Conclusions

Young people in Latvia need to be seen as a resource and active participants in political activities, by fostering their political activity in local and EU elections. Inclusive political participation is not only a democratic right but also is crucial to building stable, sustainable and peaceful societies and developing policies that respond to the specific needs of younger generations. For young people to be adequately represented in political processes, and decision-making, and in particular in elections, they must know their rights and be given the necessary knowledge and capacity to participate in a meaningful way at all levels.

Youth activity to a large degree is influenced by their parents and teachers. Influence of mass media, young people often have a negative connotation regarding politics. Majority of Latvian youth identify themselves as European citizens.

Great numbers of youngsters believe that new political parties and movements can find new solutions better. Pupils' essays speak about the awareness and exploration of citizenship and their potential oportunities in Latvia and Europe, their love for Latvia and exploration of their opportunities and contribution in Europe, by participating in international projects, traveling and following events in the European political space. The essays also address a range of issues related to regional poverty, exclusion, closure of small schools, unemployment and other economic problems.

The project's idea is in line with the priorities set out in the project School 2030. Out-of-class activities, cooperation with the non-governmental sector implemented within the framework of this project play an important role in the development of pupils' civic competences. The civic education of the project is viewed as a cross-curricular/transversal competence. In Latvia, School 2030, civic literacy is reflected in the basic school standards as the ability of every student to think and act as a responsible citizen of the community, with a well-developed national, historical and civic awareness and understanding of social processes.

The pupil is seen as an active actor, aware of his/her actions and consequences, who has developed sustainable social habits in communication and interaction with peers to jointly address the multi-level challenges of the future and sustainable development of the local community. Civic participation is viewed as building one's active life position, and one's belief in the ability of each individual to influence and change the environment and situation in which they are located. The daily activities of an individual are seen both locally and globally by participating and acting in a spirit of solidarity and responsibility, seeking negotiated solutions to the conflicting and complex problems, and working with others in finding solutions.

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