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YOUTH IDENTITY, LIFESTYLE AND ECONOMIC

Abstract:

This report is based on sixty in-depth interviews that took place starting the end of 2012 till the beginning of 2013 in two major towns in Latvia – Riga and Daugavpils – within MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement) project with young people aged from 16 to 25.

Three significant aspects of contemporary youth identity searching are studied in the project. Firstly, the understanding of contemporary Latvian youth about politics, political process and its impact on the society as well as opinion about political system and culture in Europe and Latvia are analysed. Secondly, particular attention is paid to history and memory concepts within everyday life; the importance of the identification of historical events in the growth of youth identity.

Thirdly, the relation between political issues and the everyday life is closely connected to the process of the development of young people as individuals, their leisure activities, and system of values. In the highlight of the project is the impact of economic processes (for example, the economic recession) on: the youth way of living; youth views about the system of education, its quality and importance in career development; their family members, relatives, friends, schoolmates, teachers, etc. life quality; the economic situation in Latvia; unemployment, emigration, mistrust towards the political parties and the government as well as the importance of the economical processes in the growth of their identity.

This paper emphasizes the youth understanding of political and economic processes, its influence on their everyday life, the way of living, the view about the future career and well-being, their involvement in internet activism (Have you ever been involved in internet activism?), their shopping habits (Does politics/economics ever influence what you buy?), the terms of film, book, music choice (Do you like films, books or music that have an obvious political message?) and in what way the different processes construct their identities.

Keywords:

Youth, Lifestyle, Identity, Political and economic processes

JEL Classification: Z10

Characterizing what is good about society, respondents consider both personal social dimensions. First, they talk about personal feelings, comfort, and positive public attitudes to an individual. People have become more united, they say, think more about others, they are not so selfish and are ready to help.

'Well, I am trying to see positive traits in society. Probably the best is that people are trying to help one another, despite the fact that sometimes this affects their personal needs, some personal savings, let us say, money or time. That is, I still try to see in the society, well, hope that it is not that I simply see but it is so in reality that people do not forsake each other, that there is no such competition that everybody stands on their own two feet, but still people are trying to stick together. Because you never know when you may need help and who will come to your aid.' (Vika, Daugavpils)

Family, friends, school constitute the starting point of the system of reference for many respondents, thinking about the best and the most valuable in society. There are many good and wise people and various charity projects in which young people willingly participate.

Secondly, respondents talk about the state of society - the significance of its culture, nature and traditions. Many respondents value democracy (and the absence of persecution of dissidents), joining the European Union (which allows society to become more open and free). Respondents appreciate the surrounding environment, they stress that nature in Latvia is beautiful, with many forests and parks. A diverse ethnic composition is also a value that is not fully appreciated. The ability to unite at important moments, e.g. during the song and dance festival or the language referendum (the latter is noted only by Latvian speaking respondents) is also mentioned.

It must be noted that of the 52 respondents who replied to the question about what is good about the society they live in, 19 admitted that they could not think of anything good in society, and that they did not really

know what to say, or were rather categorical in stating that there was nothing good. Pessimism and unwillingness to see the positive are quite characteristic of Latvian society as a whole, therefore it is no wonder that it appears also in the responses of young people. Indeed, this is itself, – the inability to appreciate what we have, negativism and condemnation - one of the worst aspects of society, according to many respondents. People complain a lot but do nothing to improve their life quality. Respondents identified the bad in the society much more readily. One of the sources of criticism was the poor state of the national economy and unstable politics that create a notion of eternal disorder and a chaotic state administration: 'There is no sense of stability, so you don't know what to expect, say, the next moment from those who have been in power, in politics, for a long time.' (Alnis, Riga)

Politicians do not keep their promises, they raise taxes without explanation, cut salaries and make people take unpaid leave. Politicians are also reproached for political games, corruption, poverty and unemployment in society. At the same time there is a lack of patriotism, respect for the country, people are emigrating in search of better living conditions instead of staying and working in their country and the lack of work force is growing more apparent.

The bad aspects of society noted include materialism caused by people's greed for money, mean and dishonest competition and individuals thinking only of themselves:

'Therefore this is one such bad aspect of society, because we still have competition for money. And at times it seems people find cheeky ways to bypass the law to make profit, money, for themselves. Therefore money, that would be a negative aspect of society.' (Vika, Daugavpils)

Respondents felt that people were often depressed, tough, harsh in communication, indifferent to each other, including at work (an example given is of public transport drivers). Many people, owing to their poor education and lack of enterprise, are helpless, they are unwilling to work and think of various ways to live off state benefits, the use of alcohol is widespread, people and

their property are robbed. Respondents also reported that prejudice and stereotypes – related to ethnicity and history - were dominant in society and affected contemporary public life. For example, negative attitudes towards Russians are rooted in the recent history of Latvia, as some still see Russians as ‘occupants’, a legacy of the Soviet occupation, a reminder of the lost independence. Ethnic prejudice most frequently occurs in Internet commentaries; this was felt to be a manifestation of the vulgarity of society and lack of respect for one another and the state of Latvia.

The research suggested, however, that politics does not occupy a significant place in the everyday lives of young people. Respondents, in most cases, needed time to think about their relation to politics as they do not pay much attention to it every day.

With regard to the influence of politics on consumption, respondents do not consider this to be a major factor. The absolute majority of respondents deny that politics influences their consumer habits which are determined primarily by price and quality. Significance is attributed also to ecological issues and the conditions of production of the goods. In fact the only politically related action mentioned by respondents was choosing Latvian products over imports:

‘I do try, if I go shopping with somebody else, to talk my companion into buying Latvian products. I could save those five centimes but this way at least the money circulates back to the state. The money stays with us and we won’t have given it to somebody else. To support one’s country, pay a little more but for a higher quality product. It is better quality, no doubt about it.’ (Knuts, Riga)

The rationale for choosing Latvian goods is more related to the economy than to politics; it is an act of civic responsibility to promote the growth of Latvia during economic recession. Respondents felt that by choosing Latvian goods they were supporting the common wellbeing of the whole society, providing support for the Latvian system of education, medicine and culture and improving the quality of life. However, some respondents

(approximately 10%) were indifferent to the origin of goods; for them it was more important that they liked the product and they could afford to buy it.

Just two respondents indicated a significant impact of politics on choosing goods and in both cases this related to the role of ethnic stereotypes and 'strict national views' in Latvia. Both cases also relate to language as a reflection of a broader attitude and ideology:

'I try not to buy products that do not have instructions in Russian. Many Latvia producers – who produce for instance, sprats, yes, our producers also make balsam - have labels both in Latvian and Russian explaining the ingredients, the name. I try to avoid [products] where there is no explanation in Russian. That is, the producer fulfils his obligations to the Russian-speaking customer. So that we could, so that it is easy to read the ingredients, the information about this product. If there are none, if I see that it's made in Latvia but there is no text, instructions in Russian on it, then this means that he doesn't respect his customers, when he should, as this is money, this is business. So I never take a product without explanations in Russian on the label, on the package.'

(Denis, Daugavpils)

And conversely:

'What I have noticed, is that I try to avoid products with Russian inscriptions. Instinctively, kind of. I know that this is unjustified and I shouldn't do it but I do... 'Oh, that's from there, OK, I won't buy it.'"

(Ella, Riga)

These opinions are not characteristic of respondents, but they certainly exist among the wider public and one may say that political views can affect the choice of a product. In the same way the use of language may affect business. Respondents mentioned that not knowing or using the Latvian or Russian language has caused conflict situations in shops, on the part of the respondent both when shopping and as a salesperson.

In the everyday lives of young people, their interest in music and film, the political and social matter little. At the same time respondents acknowledge that the bond with historical events, personalia and epochs for many is an interesting and essential reason to choose to see a movie or, more rarely, to read a book. Respondents said that sometimes they get bored watching only entertaining TV shows and movies because there is not much point to them. Many admit their interest in popular science programs (nature, history), documentaries. Respondents rarely read books and they appear to have little impact on the transmission of historical or political opinions: 'I read very few books, but movies, yes. I basically watch about the Second World War. Very interesting, all these. My granddad took part in war. So I think. I watch movies, I don't read books.' (Dailis, Daugavpils)

In the situation of Latvia the political and historical converge in a characteristic way, amongst those young people who have no interest in Latvian history. This group does not consider themselves as belonging to Latvia, do not feel accepted and do not seek to forge a connection with the country and culture in which they live. For some of these young people a major barrier is their insufficient knowledge of Latvian and living in a Russian-language informational space, that is watching Russian television programmes, from series through to news and political analysis programmes that are effectively made in Russia and thus contain political rhetoric and judgements that differ greatly from those held in Latvia. Some respondents demonstrated open indifference to Latvian history and no willingness or sense of obligation to learn about it:

'I'm not really interested in Latvia. As much as we had history taught at school, that much I know. I'm sometimes interested in world history, some interesting facts, but not really about Latvia. I'm no patriot.' (Kostja, Daugavpils)

Taking no interest in Latvian history and culture is a symbolical retribution for the offences done by Latvians, upon regaining independence, against Russians and people of other ethnicities who had arrived to Latvia in soviet period and the majority of them are non-citizens. Latvian politicians

have drawn significant barriers that in the understanding of many respondents gives reason not to respect the state of Latvia and Latvian language, culture, traditions, and values. Identity is searched for in Russia, Russian language, culture, orthodox faith and soviet festival traditions. This is an extremely interesting identity phenomenon that needs to be studied closer and described in greater detail, it is a specific form of Russian culture that is formed in Latvia. Some respondents represent this developing tradition.

Several respondents are critically minded about the invasion of American pop culture products in Latvia, for instance, simplistic movies:

“I watch movies not just for entertainment, see, but many prefer movies for entertainment, Hollywood movies. Shown in movie theatres. I’m not a fan of such simplistic cinema. Yes, it’s beautiful, you may watch and watch the shots, the montage, technologies of shooting. By means of what technology and what methods were used. But just following the plotline, all that is very primitive.” (Ulvis, Daugavpils)

Americanization of cultures and society within globalization is characteristic of recent decades, Latvia is no exception either. Regaining of independence in Latvia coincided with the rapid development of technology and Internet as well as considerable expansion and intensification of international connections. Latvia was unprepared to be able to assess the seeming and real benefits offered by the western society. The ideological subjection by the USSR was replaced by senseless consumption of pop culture. However, it seems that both the society on the whole and youths at present are capable of assessing the endless offers and evaluate the place of culture products in their everyday life and personality development.

A clear majority of respondents do not relate their interests in music to politics or social issues. Young people are informed about current trends in music but none of them manifested specific interest in the political views of the groups. Moreover, where a band takes a particular stance, if they like them, they are prepared to overlook differences in political views:

'In music there is a group '*Rage Against The Machine*', kind of rock metal, their music is quite attractive but it is distinctly communist and I don't like communism at all. In this respect, I'm not involved, I like the music but not the ideology of the group, but I don't have to talk to them, therefore maybe I can stand it!' (Saivis, Riga)

Such concrete examples were rare in interviews. Young people looked for honest and understandable values in music and culture:

'In music, political views are reflected in many styles of music. This is interesting when it is true, honest, when they express their own opinion. But otherwise, for me it is hard music. I mean, I cannot always listen to stuff like that.' (Kate, Daugavpils)

Some respondents noted that they are often attracted by the song lyrics although they are not looking out for such music intentionally. Socially and politically loaded music is also sometimes considered 'hard', impossible to listen to every day and oppressive: 'Yes, I saw some notorious rappers who actively criticize our government, yes, and our whole our economy in their songs. I know there is such music, but I don't listen to such stuff.' (Denis, Daugavpils)

Young people's reflections on how their friends and peers relate to music tends to confirm the apolitical character of music:

'I think it is logical, at least those of my friends who are into music, they are clear-cut free artists - artistic types who find everything related to practical ways of looking at life incomprehensible and uninteresting. You could ask them who is our president and they would have to think.' (Alda, Riga)

It is noted that those who like music, play in groups and develop some specific music trend, never get engaged in politics; it is not 'stylish', it would be considered philistine and degrading. Such young people value creativity in terms of musical quality and do not look for a 'political market': 'I have friends

who seem to be moving towards some distinctive style, like, clothes, music. Yet at the same time they still listen to a range of opinions, respect the views of others. (Milda, Daugavpils) Art is a value in itself and, for many young Latvians, it is something opposed to politics and ideology.

CONCLUSION

Having conducted the research on how political and social questions affect youth lifestyle and cultural values, our key findings are:

- respondents with better education and higher level of welfare see positive changes in the society (e.g., end of economic recession, people are friendlier);
- respondents with lower education level and those who are poorer evaluate the economic situation as critical and lay the blame on politicians;
- both Latvian-speaking and Russian-speaking respondents state that Latvia's major problems are ethnic relations and language (Latvian and Russian) use (or limitations in their use);
- politics has a marginal impact on young people's everyday life;
- "The Political" is not what young people are looking for in culture (in books, films, music);
- "The Political" seldom affects the choice of goods, youth does not associate politics with their shopping habits;
- Russian-speaking respondents give greater preference to mass media, TV and radio programs in Russian;
- Latvian-speaking and Russian-speaking respondents live in different information spaces;
- Respondents stress that culture is something quite contrary to politics.

Respondents approve of the fact that the major issues for Latvian youths are those of society and economy, while politics and history are of smaller interest. In fact many issues that cause the respondents' interest concern several spheres and are not easy to classify. Hence, interviews reflect many opinions of the economic crisis accompanied by the growing

poverty, cut of salaries (both in the private and national sectors) and small salaries and pensions, unemployment, migration, youths' interest in study and employment opportunities abroad. The respondents' reflections about the causes of the crisis and its impact on politics and their personal experience of it are of great significance, too. Respondents see a close relation between economy and politicians' actions, and they straightforwardly place the responsibility for the economic situation on politicians. Similarly many political issues arise from the different interpretation of history and culture belonging. Latvian and Russian relations make a significant discourse for respondents in their understanding and account for many issues. The content of the interviews is a vivid and rich material that reveals the originality and profundity of the opinions of a part of Latvian youths.

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