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**Active Youth? Trends of Political Participation
in East Central Europe**

Intersections. EEJSP
6(4): 5–10.
DOI: 10.17356/ieejsp.v6i4.792
<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

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Political participation is a complex political phenomenon and it is influenced by many factors ranging from the national legal context to individual skills and socio-economic backgrounds. Among all those variables, age has been found to be an essential variable regarding political behaviour. Numerous studies refer to the so-called life-cycle to illustrate the relationship between age and political participation (cf. Nie et al., 1974: 324; Quaranta and Dotti Sani, 2018; Dalton, 2008). The seminal study by Milbrath shows that ‘political participation rises gradually with age, reaches its peak in the forties and fifties and gradually declines above sixty’ (Milbrath, 1965: 134). Oftentimes, younger cohorts are thought to participate less than older cohorts (e.g. Gallego, 2007; Kriesi, 2008; Loncle et al., 2012; Melo and Stockemer, 2014), as they are less integrated into society, have fewer socio-economic resources and less experience with political participation (Brady et al., 1995).

More generally, major societal changes caused by the development of the internet or globalization have become crucial factors that shape political participation over the last two decades. Globalization offers clear economic opportunities and benefits but comes with substantial social costs that often appear to affect young people disproportionately given their tenuous transitional status within an uncertain and rapidly evolving global context. This development fosters concerns about young people’s disengagement from institutional politics and about decline in young people’s political engagement. At the same time, there is a scientific discussion about how young people may be switching to other forms of non-traditional and political engagement or civic engagement (Pattie et al., 2004; Quintelier, 2007) and some authors herald young people as creators of sophisticated new forms of participation, especially online (Vromen, 2008; Vromen et al., 2015; 2016). New social movements, especially the Fridays for Future protests, indicate that a new cohort of young people willing to protest might emerge (Streeby, 2018).

The region of East Central Europe is particularly interesting regarding youth participation. Since the end of state socialism in the region in 1989, the scientific debates on regional specifics have focused on the legacy of state socialism. Early debates in the 1990s optimistically expected the newer, supposedly more democratic cohorts – socialized in the late 1980s or later – to become the new basis of democracy, as older cohorts socialized long before 1989 were deemed

‘civilizationally incompetent’ (Sztompka, 1993: 85); and therefore expected to be less capable to adapt to the new democratic standards.

More than 30 years after the end of state socialism, the picture of youth participation in the region is not as rosy as expected earlier. Studies show that the youth, cohorts socialized after 1989, are not necessarily more democratic than older generations (Oross et al., 2020). This has to do with the fact that several countries in the region stagnated or even regressed in their level of democracy in the past years (Maertz et al., 2020; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). This trend applies particularly to Hungary and Poland, two former ‘poster boys’ of the transition to democracy that increasingly face international criticism regarding growing authoritarian tendencies. However, generally growing authoritarian tendencies and non-democratic practices in the region cannot fully explain why the optimistic perspective at the beginning of the transition has not become fully true.

This assessment is the starting point of the special issue. The goal of this special issue is to contribute to the state of the art of youth participation in East Central Europe and to highlight different regional trends. It aims to commit to the better understanding of social challenges of youth political participation, with a special focus on university students. This thematic issue presents important contributions that explore these phenomena in different countries using various research methods, including qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Several papers of the special issue focus on the analysis of political participation of students. Analysing university students’ attitudes is relevant because among social institutions universities are one of the most important socialization agents for democratic education. Many scholars argue that universities have a civic mission to serve as public good and to develop democratic attitudes and skills among students (Kovács et al., 2018). University students are embedded both in the traditional values of their families and in the new ideas of youth organizations, therefore they are very sensitive to societal changes. Two articles of this special issue use data collected by Active Youth in Hungary Research Group¹ via online and face-to-face interviews. Since its inception in 2011, this survey has used the same method to survey a single social cohort, namely students in full-time education, a group who may be considered role models for their generation in Hungary. Additionally, the special issue features papers on Poland, Czechia and Romania.

Regarding the thematic focus of the papers, two contributions of the special issue deal with the influence of demographic characteristics or socio-economic backgrounds on young people in Central and Eastern Europe. The article ‘Digitalization and gender differences in political participation among Hungarian university students’ analyses the impact of gender on online and offline participation. The paper is based on two rounds of the Active Youth data set (2015 and 2019) and uses latent class analysis to cluster young people regarding their participation activities. The results support previous studies by demonstrating that Hungarian university students are a very active stratum of society displaying

¹ <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Active-Youth-in-Hungary-AYM-Research-Group>

above-average online participation. Compared to other countries, however, the share of politically disengaged students is bigger in Hungary indicating that the increasing availability of online participation did not increase participation of all students. Furthermore, the paper found little differences in youth participation regarding demographic characteristics, including gender. The paper 'Moving through and moving away: (Higher) education strategies of Hungarian students' studies the high selectivity of the Hungarian educational system. Young people with a more advantaged family background have higher chances to persist in higher education and are more likely to start postgraduate studies. Moreover, students with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to study abroad and leave the country. The text also relies on the Active Youth data set and demonstrates that the multifaceted inequality in higher education determines the future prospects of Hungarian students and has severe consequences for youths' political culture in Hungary.

Moreover, there are three articles in the special issue that focus on mobilization of young people from different perspectives. The article 'Demobilization processes' investigates how perceived risks predict willingness of university students to participate in protests in an illiberal state that aims to control both parliamentary and street politics. Using binary regression models the paper tests whether socio-economic and political factors shape risk perception and finds that socio-economic status, political attitudes and party preferences significantly predict physical risk perception. Lower social status and dissatisfaction with democracy positively predict the likelihood of physical risks of protest. Moreover, supporters of the party in government seem to perceive police attacks as less likely. Overall, the paper did not find evidence for the statement that perceiving higher risks radicalizes university students and makes them more likely to participate in protests. The article 'Revitalization of social and civic participation in Eastern Europe?' enables readers to better understand the question why young Romanians distrust unions and why they are unable to mobilize young Romanians despite the high level of social mobilization in the country since 2012. The authors explain the lack of interaction between protests and unions with incompatible mobilization frames: taking the example of the reform of the justice system, unions opposed the reform and their main focus was on the pension system and the tax reform while popular protests, on the other hand, were mobilizing almost exclusively around the reform of the justice system. The article 'The mobilization potential of political parties among full-time university students' brings new evidence to understand to what extent political parties are able to mobilize the future intelligentsia of Hungary. Based on national and international datasets (ESS) the article examines the mobilization potential of party organizations from a comparative perspective. While the authors find that only a small group was mobilized by party organizations, they explain that Hungarian parties differ both in their willingness to recruit young students and in their mobilization potential among them. The government party attracts students with career ambitions while extra-parliamentary opposition parties, such as the green-liberal Momentum and the satire party MKKP, attract mainly young students guided by bitterness and willingness to change.

The last three papers in this special issue focus on parties and political movements that are active on the political fringes. 'Why nationalism? Biographies, motives and identities of participants in the Polish nationalist movement' studies the motivations of young Poles for joining the radical (right-wing) nationalist movement All-Polish Youth and National Radical Camp. Using biographical-narrative interviews the article shows how the multifarious interests, values and scenarios of political socialization lead people to nationalist organizations. For some participants activism is an 'ideological way of life', however for others activism is an instrument in their hands shaping political and social environment. The paper 'The nationalist turn in youth culture' also provides deep qualitative analysis of young Hungarian radical right supporters' cultural embeddedness. The study demonstrates that nationalist young people turn away from the 'global youth culture' that they describe as extremely materialist and individualist. Focus group interviews illustrate how mainstream youth culture is deemed as deviant. Moreover, these discourses indicate a traditionalist turn within the radical right culture, which is characterized by the celebration of national traditions, awe of a glorious historical past and 'national pride'. As 'The Czech Pirate Party: A new alternative, not only for the young' shows, the Pirate Party were able to present themselves as a convincing liberal alternative to far-right or populist parties. Their manifesto emphasizes classical liberal political values, like fundamental political rights or transparency of public life. Using survey data, the authors describe the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of Pirate Party voters. According to the results half of the party's electorate was from the younger generation, especially first-time voters and previous non-voters. The Pirates were able to bring apathetic, disenchanted citizens to the ballot boxes.

The results of the contributions to the special issue display a great level of diversity in East Central Europe, both thematically and geographically. The papers demonstrate that the region is affected by general global trends regarding political participation. Political activities of young people are strongly determined by their socio-economic background, and their norms and values. Additionally, their online participation rates are above average compared to other age groups and new, sometimes extreme parties are capable of mobilizing young people particularly. Established institutions, however, such as unions in Romania, hardly offer frames that can mobilize young people.

At the same time, the special issue shows phenomena that are particular to the region. Parts of the youth there display growing scepticism towards any liberal lifestyle that is strongly linked to a Western dominated liberal mainstream. The perception of liberal democracy as too individualist, too materialist and simply too liberal reflects a regional trend of anti-liberal tendencies and a turning away from liberal democratic norms and values. Some parts of the youth in the region appear to be open to anti-liberal messages from national governments and some even join nationalist movements or groups. Additionally, the growing authoritarian trend in the region impacts on political participation, as young people protesting against the government in Hungary are at a higher risk of experiencing violence by state authorities.

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