

NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM AND CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION - IS IT A CHALLENGE FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN LATVIA?

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1. ABSTRACT

Traditionally, institutional forms of participation are being studied as they can be counted and measured, for instance, voter turnout in elections or in referenda. Citizen participation in other institutional forms, for instance, public consultations and committees of the state or local government, can also be measured. Statistical data suggests that in Latvia citizens are not interested in the institutional participation, less than one percent of citizens are members of political parties, around five percent of Latvian citizens are members of non-governmental organisations, and participation rates in state and local elections are gradually decreasing. However, activity measurements in the institutional participation forms alone do not provide a notion about the real volume of citizen participation.

Development of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), on one hand, brought new opportunities, wider cooperation and communication forms in implementation of the participation process, on the other hand, the ICT created pre-conditions to an individual's expression or action that slowly decreases his/her necessity to involve in collective organisations outside working hours. According to Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, ICT has consolidated "networked individualism", which is an emerging system of social relationships focused on the individual (Castells, 2013). In Latvia, citizens are actively using the internet and more than half of population is participating in the social networks. Thereby, the question arises if Latvia could become the country where non-institutional forms of participation are encouraged by public administration. Are Latvian institutions ready to listen to individual citizens and use ICT to foster citizen participation?

The objective of this paper is to pay attention to non-institutional forms of participation and to find out which form - institutional or non-institutional participation - is preferred by Latvian citizens and public administration. Methods of the research are citizen survey about their preferable forms of political participation, as well as a questionnaire conducted to public administration representatives responsible for communication and cooperation with citizens. The findings of the paper suggest that Latvian public administration institutions are aware of citizen engagement opportunities that the ICT are offering, and they are implementing initiatives, for instance, Open Government Partnership activities and mobile applications, that could lead to the capability of using networked individualism in favour of citizen participation. On the other hand, it is not enough that Latvian public institutions are simply present in the same digital world where citizens are spending their time, they also must be attractive and open to two-way communication to engage citizens in the political participation. Thereby, there is a need for a more consistent and comprehensive policy to ensure that citizens are using digital tools that are provided for them.

Keywords: citizen participation, institutional and non-institutional forms of participation, local governments, public administration

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2. INTRODUCTION

When analysing definitions of political participation by their empirical content, Teorell, a Swedish researcher, distinguished three participation spectra by modelling the participation causes and consequences (see Figure 1). He saw the participation as an influencing attempt; as a direct involvement in decision-making; and as a discussion/negotiation (Teorell, 2006).

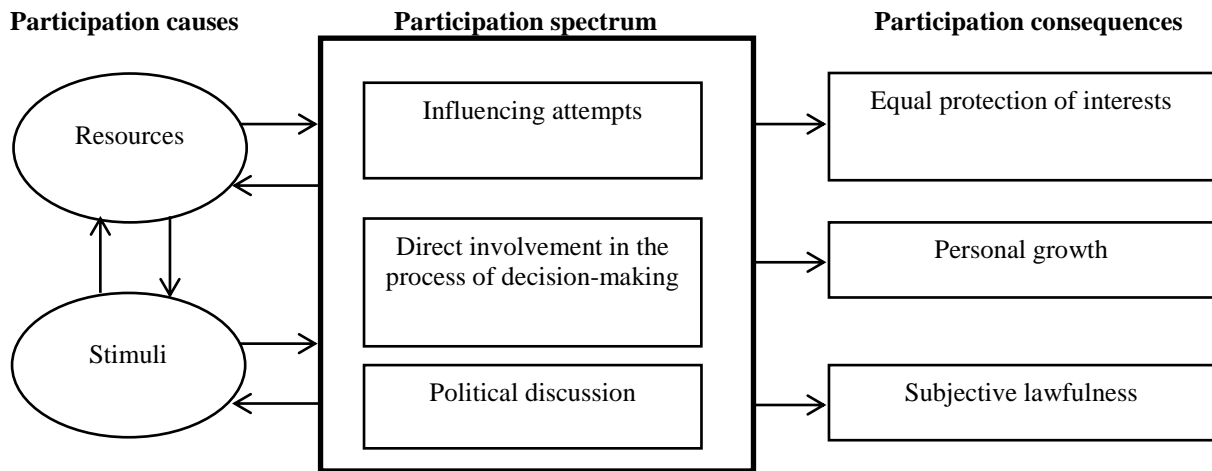


Figure 1. Causes, spectrum, and consequences of political participation

Source: Jan Teorell, 2006

In the first case, participation is defined as an attempt to affect those who have a voice in the government, ensuring equal protection of interests. In the second case, participation means to be a voice in the government. If individuals have wider opportunities to directly cooperate in the process of decision-making at their work place, local community, or elsewhere, this would facilitate their self-growth. In the third case, participation is a manner for clarifying what needs to be said. A discussion or negotiation provides a more informed opinion of the society, thus promoting a better outcome in the process of decision-making and quality of democratic decisions. The discussion makes the interested parties to summarise proofs and reach consent where they previously had a disagreement. Thus, subjective lawfulness is ensured, since decisions are based on the opinions which are accepted by individuals (Teorell, 2006).

Participation in the process of decision-making (*political participation*) is an activity which is organised by a collective in a well-determined manner (*includes a deliberate intention*) with an aim to affect the outcome of decision. Respecting the conclusion of several researchers that participation can also be individual, the individual nature of participation is reflected at the beginning or at the initiation stage of the process, which, during the time of the decision, turns into a collective activity where individuals join each other to represent a certain group's interests or a set of opinions that have been obtained in the result of discussions. Also, although participation in elections initially is an activity of an individual, this process is expressed as a form of collective influence. Thus, the individual activity in political participation has a potential to affect the outcome when the private interests of the individual are met.

Verba, the authority of participation studies, in cooperation with various scientists launched an analysis of the participation process with the examination of subjective factors of an individual. At first, in cooperation with Gabriel Almond, subjective competence of an individual was analysed, i.e., to what extent do individuals understand and are competent in political processes in order to determine what is the actual potential of their competence and, thus, also of their political impact, and to participate in the process of decision-making (Almond, Verba, 1989). In cooperation with the scientists Kay Lehman Schlozman and Brady, Verba studied the reasons for the individuals not taking part in politics. They obtained three answers — *they cannot*, *they do not want*, and *they haven't been asked* (see Table 1). When assessing the three groups of the answers, the researchers identified the factors that could affect participation of individuals: corresponding resources, motivation, and mobilisation. Verba and his partners defined these subjective factors of political participation as civic voluntarism model (Verba et al., 1995), other authors — Steven Rosenstone and John Hansen — in their later studies — as aspects of private participation (Rosenstone, Hansen, 2003), while Pippa Norris — as

individual-level factors of political participation. Essence of the civic voluntarism model is simple: *individuals most likely will participate when they can, when they wish, and when they are asked to do so*. This does not mean that all three factors are the required pre-conditions; however, they serve as an asset to emphasise the truth that without motivation and mobilisation, presence of resources alone does not facilitate political participation (Schlozman, 2003).

Table 1. Individual-level factors of political participation

| Answer formulation | Explanation | Factors |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| They cannot | Characterises insufficient resources — time, money, and civic skills — of an individual for him/her to be able to participate | Individual resources that are formed by features of socio-economic status (SES) |
| They do not want | Characterises weak interest in politics and questions that are topical to the society Participation has small or zero significance | Factors that motivate the political interest and participation |
| They haven't been asked | Indicates isolation of an individual from recruitment networks that help to mobilise for political purposes | Mobilisation or integration channels — participation in social a.o. network-type organisations |

Source: Summary of the co-author Lilita Seimuskane by using Civic Voluntarism Model by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, which identifies the factors that could affect participation

Regarding the resources, Verba and his peers emphasise the importance of time, money, and civic skills. These are the questions that are related to features of the socio-economic status (*socio-economic model, SES*), namely, *education, income, occupation, age, gender, family status*. The key principle of the SES model is that the individuals with a higher socio-economic status, those who have a higher level of education and income, as well as a job of a higher status, are more active participants. In several studies both in 90ties of the 20th century (Verba et al., 1995) and in early 21st century (Rosenstone, Hansen, 2003; Hooghe, Quintelier, 2013), the SES is still recognised to be a significant decisive factor of participation activity. Also, the latest participation studies in Europe approve that effect of the socio-economic status is still stable in the new forms of political participation such as political consumerism, which as a participation form is more often used by the individuals with sufficient availability to financial resources (Marien, Hooghe, Quintelier, 2010).

It cannot be said that researchers of participation and public trust would agree that the connection between participation and public trust is very close. However, most studies on participation show that the trust factor is of importance. Kenneth Patrick Ruscio thinks that (...) *trust should be at least minimal so that political programmes would continue to function after they are introduced* (Ruscio, 1997). Meanwhile, the connection between the public trust and stability of the state is indicated by Mark E. Warren, a US professor. For the state to develop and for political leaders to implement reforms, take risks, and guide the state in the selected direction, public trust has an uppermost role as it shows voters' support to the chosen policy (...) *democracy is a healthier society with greater trust in political institutions, meaning that trust is required for democratic stability, viability, and vitality* (Warren, 1999).

Theorists of public policy examined trust in several dimensions: as *social trust* – trust among members of society, and as *political trust* – trust of the society in public institution and their representatives. Social trust affects political trust in relationship with the authority. Geraint Parry says political trust is an epiphenomenon of social trust. When there is no social trust, there is also no political trust, and the resulting political system will be less stable (Parry, 1976). Political trust is clearly expressed when population evaluates work of the government and its institutions, government's policy direction (called *macro-level trust* or *organisational trust*), and/or work, honesty, and delivering of promises of certain leaders (called *individual political trust* or *micro-level trust*). *Political trust is a judgment of citizens that the system and political team are responsible and will act even when there is no regular inspections* (Miller, Listhaug, 1990). Belgian researchers Marc Hooghe and Ellen Quintelier, based on the participation study's results in Europe, conclude that political trust positively affect participation in an election, while negatively —selection of non-institutional participation forms, namely, the individuals whose political trust is low, will be more active in protest forms, such as demonstrations, making petitions and boycotts (Hooghe, 2013).

Latvia is very interesting country where political participation and opportunities of digital non-institutional forms of participation can be studied. On one hand Latvians are still learning how democracy works and how important political engagement is for daily decision-making process of public administration. On other hand Latvia is experiencing rapid digital development, thus offering digital environment as a place where public administration and citizens can meet and cooperate. The challenge for public administration in Latvia is how to use this situation for a good benefit and foster political engagement in Latvia.

3. METHODOLOGY

The objective of this paper is to pay attention to non-institutional forms of participation and to find out which form - institutional or non-institutional participation - is preferred by Latvian citizens and public administration. Thereby, co-authors of the publication collaborated to provide and compare information from both sides, analysing not only citizens' perspective in political participation, but also opinion of public administration in Latvia. Methods of the research were citizen survey on their preferable forms of political participation, as well as a questionnaire conducted to public administration representatives responsible for communication and cooperation with citizens.

Citizen survey was conducted in cooperation with Latvian research centre SKDS in June 2012. 1050 Latvian citizens aged 15 to 74 participated in the survey, representing all regions of Latvia. For further analysis results were selected from 623 respondents – those who provided answers to all questions of the survey. Results were analysed with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 17.

In the survey citizens were asked to evaluate different forms of participation which they can use to defend their interests in the local municipality. They evaluated each form of participation in the scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means that they see this form of participation as very ineffective and 10 means that they see this form of participation as very effective. Respondents were asked to evaluate institutional forms of participation, such as voting, participation in referenda, and involvement in a political party, as well as non-institutional forms of participation, such as participation in the demonstration, use of social media, and involvement in a non-governmental organisation. However, respondents were not informed about this division and initially both forms of participation, institutional and non-institutional, were provided in one list.

Questionnaire to representatives of the Latvian public administration was carried out in April 2019 using online research survey software QuestionPro. Personal invitation to fill out the questionnaire was sent to those representatives of Latvian public administration who are responsible for communication with society and cooperation with citizens. In total 19 completed questionnaires were recorded, representing six Latvian ministries, Parliament, Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre, local governments and several other Latvian public institutions. In the questionnaire, each representative of the public administration was asked to provide in-depth information how his/her institution is using tools of digital environment, such as social media and smartphone applications, to communicate with citizens and to engage them in the decision-making process. Respondents were also evaluating different forms of participation and communication channels from the perspective of the institution they were representing.

4. LATVIAN CITIZENS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Possibilities of citizen participation in the decision-making process in Latvia is regulated by the Republic of Latvia Cabinet Regulation No. 970 “Procedures for the Public Participation in the Development Planning Process”. According to this regulation, *upon deciding on commencing development planning in a field or sector of policy, or territory, an institution shall determine an official who is responsible for ensuring the public participation* (Latvijas Vestnesis, 2013), thus, public administration is responsible for citizen engagement and can choose the stage of the decision-making process when citizens are addressed, as well as the methods to do that. This regulation indicates various types of activities for individuals to participate in development planning. Nevertheless, in the home page of State Chancellery of Latvia, non-governmental organisations are emphasised as the preferable way for citizen participation to ensure better chances to influence decision-making (Valsts Kanceleja, 2018). Thereby, in the everyday decision-making process, citizen engagement is implemented through various working groups and advisory councils. In Latvian ministries and their subordinate institutions,

the amount of advisory bodies is gradually increasing: in 2012, there were 135 advisory bodies, but in 2018 it increased to 170 (State Chancellery of Latvia, 2018). In total numbers, this is good news for political engagement in Latvia, however, it is important to take into account that Latvians are not very active in participation in the non-governmental organisations – only around five percent of Latvian citizens are members of non-governmental organisations (Parresoru koordinācijas centrs, 2017). Therefore in Latvia there is a need for other types of participation methods that can be more attractive to citizens.

It is important for public administration to provide different possibilities for citizen participation in the decision-making process. To decide which participation methods can provide more successful citizen engagement, the best choice would be to listen to citizens themselves – what forms of participation they value the most. Results of citizen survey (see Table 2) show which of institutional and non-institutional forms of participation are preferred by Latvian citizens.

Table 2. Evaluation of institutional and non-institutional forms of participation

| N=623 | 1;2;3 | 1;2;3,4 | 8;9;10 | 7;8;9;10 | Order according to evaluation |
|--|-------|---------|--------|----------|-------------------------------|
| Institutional forms of participation | | | | | |
| Local (municipal) elections | 16.9% | 24.4% | 33.9% | 48.5% | 1 |
| Municipal referendum | 24.0% | 30.7% | 29.1% | 43.0% | 2 |
| Public consultations | 24.6% | 31.3% | 23.6% | 35.8% | 3;4 |
| Engaging in political parties | 40.8% | 52.2% | 10.7% | 19.8% | 6 |
| Participation in municipal commissions, working groups, advisory councils | 29.1% | 39.1% | 14.8% | 24.3% | 5 |
| Personal contacts with local government deputies or officials | 22.6% | 31.2% | 25.6% | 37.9% | 3;4 |
| Non-institutional forms of participation | | | | | |
| Citizen meetings | 21.0% | 29.1% | 25.3% | 38.8% | 5;6 |
| Round table discussions and forums | 30.0% | 39.8% | 14.6% | 28.9% | 7;8 |
| Participation in non-governmental organizations and professional organizations | 33.6% | 46.3% | 10.3% | 21.4% | 10 |
| Citizen surveys | 16.7% | 25.6% | 24.6% | 39.5% | 3;4 |
| Collection of signatures and signing petitions | 17.4% | 27.2% | 25.4% | 42.1% | 3;4 |
| Legal protests, demonstrations and strikes | 21.6% | 31.1% | 24.1% | 40.1% | 5;6 |
| Using mass media for promotion of important issues | 16.5% | 21.2% | 32.1% | 46.9% | 1;2 |
| Using social media for promotion of important issues | 15.5% | 20.5% | 30.4% | 47.3% | 1;2 |
| Using influence of trade union | 32.9% | 44.1% | 13.0% | 24.5% | 7;8 |
| Moving to another place of residence | 52.9% | 59.9% | 13.0% | 19.2% | 9 |

Source: Co-author's Lilita Seimuskane and Latvian research centre SKDS Citizen survey, 2012

Respondents of the survey recognised voting in local (municipal) elections as the most effective form of participation; 33.9% of respondents rated it with 10 (very effective), 9 or 8, and 48.5% rated it with 10, 9, 8 or 7. High rating was also given for the use of mass media for promotion of important issues (32.1% and 46.9% accordingly) and use of social media for promotion of important issues (30.4% and 47.3% accordingly). Voting in local (municipal) elections is an institutional form of participation, but the next two most popular choices are non-institutional forms of participation. Participation in non-governmental organizations and professional organizations was distinguished as the least effective form of participation: 33.6% of respondents rated it with 1 (very ineffective), 2 or 3, and 46.3% rated it with 1, 2, 3 or 4. Low rates were also given to moving to another place of residence (52.9% and 59.9% accordingly), and engaging in political parties (40.8% and 52.2% accordingly). Thereby, according to the results of survey, there is a contrast in attitude how public administration and citizens in Latvia value different forms of participation, in particular, the participation in

non-governmental organizations and professional organizations that for now still is the preferred type of cooperation by Latvian public administration.

When elaborating recommendations to local governments for improvement of the participation process, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 2009 in its “Recommendation to member states on the evaluation, auditing and monitoring of participation and participation policies at local and regional level” suggested to use the CLEAR model to diagnose and self-evaluate the participation process (Council of Europe, 2009). CLEAR model was developed by a team of British researchers, led by Gerry Stoker and based on empirical studies to identify the factors that explain the unequal attitude of the citizens towards involvement in the participation process. The researchers identified five key factors of the participation process.

The most effective participation is possible when population:

- can participate — this is determined by resources and knowledge for participation;
- likes to participate — this is a sense of affiliation that strengthens participation;
- is enabled to participate — provision of participation opportunities;
- is asked to engage — the population is involved by official administration institutions or groups of non-governmental organisations and communal organisations;
- is responded to — the population sees that its opinions are taken into consideration. (Stoker, 1996).

According to the CLEAR model, participation is assessed in five principal research directions:

- Capacity required for citizen participation — resources, knowledge, skills;
- How weak/strong is citizen sense of affiliation to a place/community where they live and what are the impact factors;
- What is the legal and institutional framework of a local government for development of participation democracy and how actively does the local civic society interacts with the local power;
- What forms of participation local government uses to improve the local policy and services provided, and how often are they used;
- What evaluation is given by the population to the participation opportunities and the mechanisms offered (Stoker, 1996).

In case of Latvian public institutions and their capability to engage citizens in the participation process, the most challenging factor is sense of affiliation. Latvia`s historical background and comparatively small experience of democracy is impacting how citizens perceive their political participation opportunities and do they like to use them.

5.DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT AND NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM

In Latvia, citizens are actively using the internet: in 2018, 82 percent of all Latvian households had access to the internet and 62 percent of citizens were participating in the social networks (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2018). Also, Latvian public institutions are present in the digital environment, the most used social media platforms are *Facebook.com* and *Twitter.com*, lately, *Instagram.com* is becoming more and more popular as well. Still, in most cases social media is used for one-way top-down communication, considering it as another mass media channel that could be used as a place where represent institution and not engage in two-way communication. There are few first cases how public institutions are using smartphone applications for citizen participation, for example, application “Futbols” by the State Chancellery of Latvia, that helps to assess the quality of the work of public institutions and suggest improvements (Valsts Kanceleja, 2014). Since 2011. Latvia is also participating in the Open Government partnership initiative that is providing more comfortable environment for public participation, for example, encouraging Open data policy in Latvian public institutions (Open Government partnership initiative, 2018).

Digital development of Latvia and representation of Latvian public administration in the digital environment creates a notion that Latvia could be used as a positive example how country could be using the opportunities of the 21th century. However, a closer look on the online activities of Latvian public administration and analysis from the perspective of their ability to engage citizens in the decision-making process rises a question whether the opportunities are used successfully. Therefore, it is important to understand

the viewpoint of public administration on digital representation and its connection to citizen engagement. In the questionnaire to representatives of the Latvian public administration, respondents were asked to evaluate various types of activities that could help foster civic and political engagement (See Table 3). Types of activities that were provided for the evaluation represented both traditional and digital activities that could lead to better citizen engagement in the decision-making process of public administration.

**Table 3. Activities that could help foster civic and political engagement
(Evaluation by representatives of Latvian public administration)**

| N=19 | 1;2;3 | 1;2;3,4 | 5;6 | 7;8;9;10 | 8;9;10 | Order according to evaluation |
|---|-------|---------|-----|----------|--------|-------------------------------|
| Active communication of institution in social media (including evenings, weekends and national holidays) | 10% | 15% | 10% | 75% | 58% | 4 |
| Institution is providing citizens with access to research data, statistics and other relevant information (Open data) | 5% | 5% | 21% | 74% | 58% | 3 |
| Participation events organized by institution in the regions of Latvia | 16% | 16% | 16% | 68% | 58% | 5 |
| Institution's mobile app or participation app for smartphones | 32% | 42% | 16% | 42% | 32% | 7 |
| Educating young people in schools and universities on civic and political participation | 5% | 5% | 5% | 90% | 74% | 1 |
| Broader representation of citizens in the institution's consultative bodies (advisory councils or working groups) | 16% | 21% | 26% | 53% | 26% | 6 |
| Informing citizens in mass media on opportunities for civic and political participation in Latvia | 5% | 11% | 5% | 84% | 74% | 2 |

Source: Co-author`s Eduards Lielpeters questionnaire to representatives of the Latvian public administration, 2019

Results of the questionnaire indicate that representatives of the Latvian public administration consider communication in social media as useful activity that can help foster civic and political engagement: 75% of respondents rated it with 7, 8, 9 or 10 (in scale from 1 to 10). Also access to Open data is seen positively: 58% of respondents rated it with 8, 9 or 10. However, respondents of the questionnaire gave the highest rating to those two types of activities that are not directly related with public institutions' responsibility to foster civic and political engagement - educating young people in schools and informing citizens in mass media on opportunities for civic and political participation in Latvia. This result corresponds to the often-mentioned belief that citizens are not participating in the decision-making process because they lack information on their possibilities to participate which was also revealed in the survey that was carried out by the State Chancellery of Latvia (State Chancellery of Latvia, 2018).

In the questionnaire to representatives of the Latvian public administration, respondents were asked which is the fastest way for an individual person to reach an institution in case there is a specific information that citizen wants to deliver to the representative responsible for this matter. Answers showed that current habits of information exchange in the institutions accept digital communication from citizens: more than half of the respondents mentioned e-mail or social media as advisable channel for communication. However, communication habits vary a lot, several institutions indicated that official application to the representative still would be the best choice to guarantee that citizen opinion is noticed by the responsible representative.

Citizen view on their possibilities to provide their individual input in the decision-making process of public institutions was evaluated in the survey that was carried out in 2018 by the State Chancellery of Latvia. Respondents of this survey evaluated their possibilities in 5.86 on average (in the scale from 1 to 10). Although half of the respondents considered that in Latvia there are various opportunities for individual person to provide his/her opinion to the public institutions, disbelief of citizens in their ability to influence social and political

processes is mentioned as an obstacle that hinders wider involvement. Results of the survey points out the lack of feedback from the public institutions as one of reasons for this disbelief (State Chancellery of Latvia, 2018).

In Latvia citizens have access to both non-institutional and institutional forms of participation. Although current communication habits and regulations of public administration is supporting organised/group participation, use of social media, smartphone applications and more classical methods, such as round table discussions and forums are encouraging individual participation as well. Use of digital environment for citizen engagement is not solving all reasons why citizens cannot, do not want, and haven't been asked to participate, but it is definitely opening new chapter in the history of political participation. And Latvia has good reasons to become a noteworthy example in this new chapter!

6. CONCLUSION

Citizen survey indicated that for political participation they are using both non-institutional and institutional forms of participation. Thus, from the public administration's perspective it would be advisable to use both forms of participation. Elderly people prefer institutional forms of participation, such as voting in local (municipal) elections, but youth is more willing to choose non-institutional forms of participation.

Although consultative bodies, such as advisory councils or working groups, are common practice in Latvia for citizens political engagement, both studies indicated that this type of participation is not rated highly by citizens and representatives of public administration. Either there is need for improvement how the process of consultative bodies is organised, or in appropriate cases this method of engagement could be replaced with some non-institutional forms of participation, for example, smartphone application.

In Latvia digital environment and online habits of citizens are providing good opportunities for development of networked individualism and digital non-institutional forms of participation. Citizens and representatives of public institutions have similarly positive views on social media as a tool for civic engagement. Citizens rated it as very useful for promotion of important issues, and representatives of public institutions considered that social media can help foster civic engagement. Nevertheless, in the public institutions there are distinct differences in communication habits and internal regulations. There is a need for common guidelines on use of social media, to provide more transparent and better communication and foster citizens political participation.

It is expected that in the coming years of the 21st century study directions of participation will take their roots in search for the solutions to the issues of how to make individuals return to participation in at least some forms of institutional participation, such as in elections. Scientific interest in studying and diagnosing the non-institutional forms of participation will grow as well and the role of various forms of direct (participation) democracy in interaction between the population and authorities will increase.

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