

# FOSTERING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: COMMUNICATION OF LATVIAN MINISTRIES ON FACEBOOK

*Eduards Lielpeters<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. ABSTRACT

In a democracy, it is important that citizens have access to information about the activities of the institutions, as well as they have various opportunities for participation in the decision-making process of public administration. In Latvia relations between public administration and society is fragile. In the decision-making process important role in Latvia is given to non-governmental organisations that are acting as representatives of citizens in advisory bodies and also in other ways are providing their knowledge to public administration. At the same time, only around 5 percent of Latvian citizens are members of non-governmental organisations. Thus, in reality, just a small part of the population is participating in the decision-making process. At the same time, only 32 percent of citizens trust in public administration and often decisions made by institutions are questioned by society and mass media in Latvia. There is a need to foster citizen participation and their trust in public administration. As a contemporary solution to this problem could be a more thoughtful activity of public administration on the digital environment - to develop closer relations between institutions and citizens, as well as, to provide digital participation opportunities also to those citizens who are not members of non-governmental organizations, hence silent majority of Latvian society.

To understand the current situation in Latvia and gather data that could be used to improve relations between public administration and citizens, there is implemented content analysis of Facebook pages maintained by Latvian Ministries. Ministries are selected for the content analysis as they are already obligated to provide opportunities for citizen participation in the decision-making process. And the content of Facebook pages is analysed because this social media is used by all ministries and it is most often used social media in Latvia. In the study is analysed the main Facebook pages of all 13 Latvian ministries in the six months period – from July 2019 until December 2019. In this period all ministries together have published 3181 entries that are analysed according to three groups of indicators: content indicators, message indicators and feedback indicators (overall 13 main indicators that are composed of more than 60 sub-indicators).

Results of the research are demonstrating that for now institutions have various and noticeably different habits in the use of digital opportunities that social media are offering for content creation, network building and two-way communication. Ministries have various communication styles - in nine Facebook accounts educational entries are published slightly more often than informative entries, however, the proportions of educational posts vary between ministries, as well as engaging posts are still a minority. As the biggest drawback was recognised that in the analysed period there were only four percent social media posts that are about citizen participation opportunities or decisions made with the participation of citizens or their representatives, thus continuing to maintain the comprehension that decision-making process is mostly happening behind closed doors. Considering the results of the study there is proposed model for fostering digital participation. Implementation of the model could help to combine good practices that are already used by some of the ministries and help to foster two-way dialogue with society, also strengthening citizens participation in the decision-making process.

## 2. POINTS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Although Latvian ministries have various communication styles on social media, in the content analysis were noticed several common mistakes that are lowering citizens interest to interact with institutions, as well as good examples that are attracting the attention of followers. Therefore, the results of the study are providing

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comprehensive notion about the specific situation in Latvia that could be used as an example for the development of social media communication guidelines.

Proposed model for fostering digital participation can be used by public administration institutions to ensure more meaningful digital relations with society, developing public communication as a well-considered and planned two-way process that helps to foster citizen participation in the decision-making process and strengthens citizen trust in public administration.

**Keywords:** citizen participation, decision-making process, digital democracy, public administration, social media

### 3. INTRODUCTION

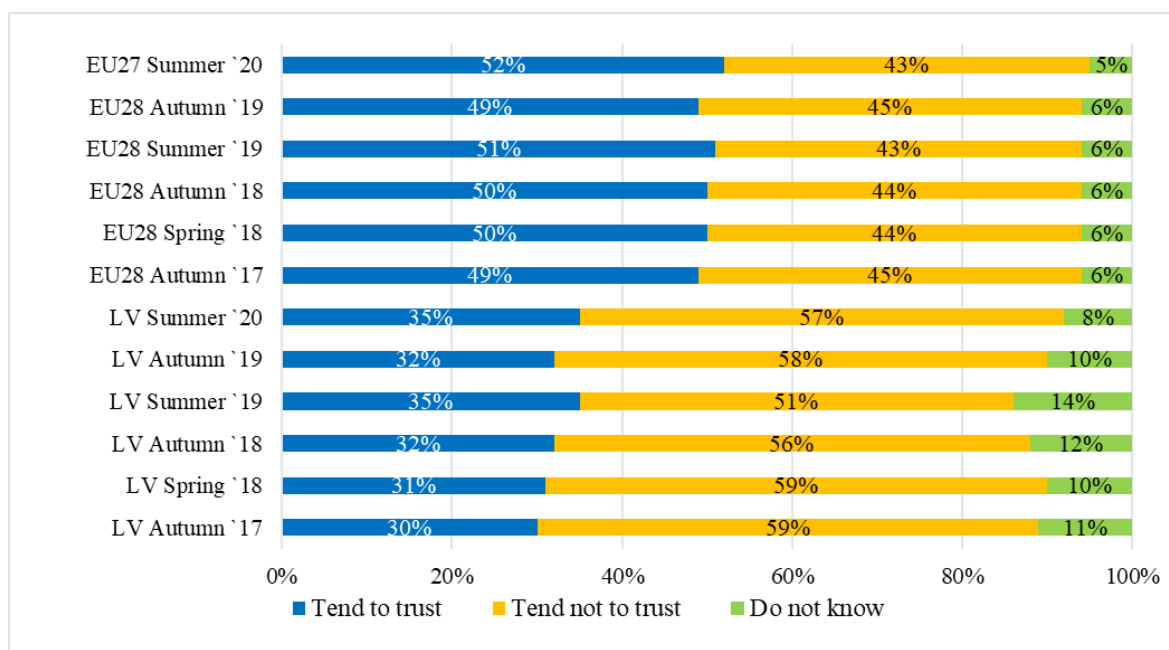
Citizens in Latvia have comparatively good opportunities to use their rights as members of a democratic country – they can vote in elections, establish their own political party with other likeminded people, demonstrate their opinion in pickets and public consultations, sign petitions and law proposals, as well as seek to have a closer dialogue with public administration in the decision-making process.

Currently there are registered more than 50 political parties in Latvia (The Register of Enterprises of the Republic of Latvia, 2021). Most of them are comparatively small and only around one percent of Latvian citizens are members of a political party (Van Biezen, et al., 2012). One of the reasons could be the low bar that is needed to establish a party in Latvia - the minimal number of founders is 200 people (Latvijas Vestnesis, 2019), another reason could also be the low trust in political parties (Providus, 2017), hence, most citizens are not motivated to become members of political parties. The election process in Latvia is comparatively free and fair (World Bank Group, 2021). In each election there are many political parties that candidates to become the new political power and often new parties are established for this purpose. Potential voters' interest in the election process is more grounded and in the last two decades citizen participation in elections has gradually decreased. For the national parliament elections – from 72 percent in 2002 (CVK, 2002) to 55 percent in 2018 (CVK, 2018). For the municipal elections – from 62 percent in 2001 (CVK, 2001) to 50 percent in 2017 (CVK, 2017). And for the European parliament elections – from 41 percent in 2004 (CVK, 2004) to 34 percent in 2019 (CVK, 2019). Nevertheless, citizens can also seek for more regular participation and engage in the decision-making process of public administration. 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” (Republic of Latvia Cabinet, 2009) emphasizing that citizens can participate in interinstitutional working groups and advisory councils, public discussions and consultations, involve in discussion groups, forums and other participation activities. Citizens can also submit in writing an opinion on a development planning document during its drafting stage and prepare an opinion before a decision is taken according to the procedures stipulated by the decision-making institution, as well as provide objections and proposals according to the procedures stipulated by the decision-making institution during the decision-making process and participate in the introduction of the policy. Citizen participation is emphasized also in the State Administration Structure Law of the Republic of Latvia, stating that “institutions shall involve public representatives (representatives of public organisations and other organised groups, individual competent persons) in their activities, by including such persons in working groups, advisory councils or by asking them to provide opinions” and pointing out that it is an obligation of institutions to consider citizen opinion, because: “In matters important to the public, institutions have a duty to organise a public discussion. If an institution takes a decision that does not correspond to the opinion of a considerable part of society, the institution shall provide a special substantiation for such decision” (Saeima, 2002).

In Latvia, there are 153 public administration institutions that are officially considered as direct administration authority (Valsts kanceleja, 2020A). Of all those institutions' ministries and State Chancellery are those who have the largest responsibility about citizen participation, still, according to authors calculations (in July 2020) – from the remaining institutions at least 40 also should have to some degree engage citizens in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the necessity to emphasize and implement citizen participation should also be a responsibility to Latvian Parliament, the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia and the Chancellery of the President of

Latvia. It is estimated by the State Chancellery of Latvia that in 2018 there were 170 consultative bodies in Latvian ministries (State Chancellery of Latvia, 2018) – citizens there are usually represented by non-governmental organisations or lobby groups that are acting upon their specific field of competence. That is also officially advised by the State Chancellery of Latvia (Valsts kanceleja, 2020B), if citizens would like to have a better impact on decisions made by public administration, they should find a non-governmental organisation that is already participating in the decision-making process. Similarly, citizens can also provide their expertise in the meetings of the Parliament committees, but also here it is emphasized that citizens should be related to some non-governmental organisation or other social-partner organisation (Latvijas Republikas Saeima, 2021). At the same time, in non-governmental organisations is participating only five percent of Latvian citizens (Parresoru koordinācijas centrs, 2017), thus, non-governmental organisations only theoretically are representing all citizens and in reality, there is a silent majority of the population that is not directly engaged in the decision-making process. In the recent research implemented by Latvian think-tank *Providus* it was concluded that Latvian citizens currently can be described as civic passive because “in the last two years period only 14 percent have participated in a public consultation, picket, donated their time to a problem of public importance, signed a letter of public importance or contacted the elected deputies” (Providus, 2021). Hence, Latvian citizens theoretically have legally established and wide participation opportunities, but those opportunities are actively used only by some part of the population. To foster citizens wider participation and interest them in participation still is an essential task of the Latvian public administration.

According to a study by Marc Hooghe and Ellen Quintelier, compared to western Europe, people in central and eastern Europe are less likely to engage in institutionalised political action such as contacting a politician, working for a political party or organisation, and they are also less interested in non-institutionalised participation opportunities such as signing a petition or joining a demonstration (Hooghe, Quintelier, 2013). This tendency is noticeable both in the segments of the younger population and older population. Analysis of the situation is suggesting that “lower participation rates in post-authoritarian regimes can be explained by current political reality, namely a lack of good governance, continuing high levels of corruption, and relatively poor economic performance, all of which can serve to reduce trust and discourage people from engaging with politics” (European Social Survey, 2012). In Latvia citizen trust in public administration and parliament is gradually growing, still the trust rate is lowest in the Baltic states and below the EU average. In Summer 2020 in Latvia 35 percent of citizens tended to trust in public administration (see Figure 1), at the same time the EU average was 52 percent.



**Figure 1. Citizen trust in public administration, Latvia and the EU average (2017 - 2020), share (in %)**  
 Source: *Eduards Lielpeters` construction based on data from Standard Eurobarometer (88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93), 2018 – 2020*

Public administration can earn citizens trust gradually and with hard work. Nowadays that also means keeping open and honest dialogue with society. Thus, public administration also has to be present in the digital environment and be able to communicate with citizens in a contemporary manner and adapting to citizens habits. Latvian public institutions are present in the digital environment, the most used social media platforms are Facebook and Twitter, lately, Instagram is becoming more and more popular as well. Still, in most cases social media is used for one-way communication, considering it as another mass media channel that could be used as a place where represent the institution and not engage in two-way communication. In the report of Latvian E-index 2019 (VARAM, 2019), it was concluded that although the use of social media is becoming more and more popular by public administration institutions, there is a lack of purposeful use of these resources - not all institutions with social media accounts use them purposefully for one-way or two-way communication with citizens and are not providing timely answers to citizen questions or are not publishing content often enough.

Looking closer to the specific situation of Latvian ministries, it is noticeable that for all social media networks, the number of followers has grown since 2019. The total amount of social media followers for all Latvian ministries (according to author's calculations), in September 2020 were 80712 followers in Facebook.com, 7175 followers in Instagram.com, 103536 followers in Twitter.com, 2282 followers in Youtube.com. Comparison of the content published by Latvian ministries demonstrates that there are fewer differences than would be expected. Instagram is used by seven ministries and entries are published in various capacity, in some cases very seldom, in all cases, content is almost the same or partly the same as on Facebook. In the case of Twitter Latvian ministries are more active – all of them are having Twitter accounts and almost all of the ministries are also actively publishing entries. Still, for five ministries content on Twitter is almost the same as on Facebook, sometimes there are even no differences in the text and visual material. Six ministries in Twitter are using some entries that are published on the Facebook, but there are also original content and retweets of content made by subordinate institutions and mass media that are not available in the Facebook feed. There are only two ministries that on Twitter are publishing mostly different content than on Facebook - Ministry of Economics and the Ministry of Finance. Hence, in most cases, citizens do not have reason to follow ministry in more than one social media platform, as there is not so large difference in the content. At the same time, it is also doubtful if it is possible to reach a different segment of the population with the same content, just by changing the social media platform where it is published. Thus, a more serious attitude to digital presence would be needed from public administration to ensure that institutions can develop digital relations with citizens.

In the European Union recently has grown institutional support to the necessity for public institutions to acquire the digital environment and do it faster than before. That has come as a planned follow-up to previous policies, but partly also as an answer to problems highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis. In the State of the Union 2020 address president of the European Commission emphasized that current near future in the EU should become Europe's Digital Decade, by the development of digital public services and a secure European e-identity (European Commission, 2020). Further support to this attitude and sphere of activity is given also by Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government (Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, 2020), emphasizing also the need to strengthen citizens digital participation. This framework is giving additional motivation and incentive for the EU member countries to be more active in their digital presence and digital innovations. In the European Union digital competitiveness of the member states and their digital performance is measured with the Digital Economy and Society Index. When looking more carefully to each indicator, results of Latvia are heterogeneous, integration of digital technology is evaluated with 24.5 score (24th place in the EU), but digital public services and e-governance is evaluated with 73.7 score (7th place in the EU) – “Progress is driven by the growing number of Latvians who actively use e-government services and by the increased availability of pre-filled forms and open data” (European Commission, 2019). According to conclusions of the Digital Economy and Society Index report, further progress in Latvia will be reached if there are implemented data-driven innovative products and services, also cross-sectoral partnerships are established. Hence, in Latvia between institutions and citizens digital relations are already existing, but hard work is still needed to develop this situation even further and ensure also digital participation for citizens. Considering that in Latvia only a small part of the population is motivated to participate in the decision-making process, as well

as there is a lack of comprehension about democratic processes and significance of participation, there is a need for more careful digital communication by the public administration. As it was pointed out by Sherry R. Arnstein: “Informing citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation” (Arnstein, 1969). And that is still unsolved task nowadays – 50 years later. The digital environment is providing new opportunities for direct and fast two-way communication between institutions and citizens. The challenge for public administration is to be able to utilize those opportunities.

The research is analysing the current situation in Latvia – the digital presence of public administration on social media, considering that in the context of citizen participation. Communication of Latvian ministries on Facebook is analysed to understand current digital habits and possible future steps that public administration should make to develop more closer relations with citizens in the digital environment. Thereby suggesting that nowadays public administration should do more than mere digital presence on social media. Hence, the use of social media by public administration should be a well-considered process that could also help to foster citizen participation. Further paper is organised as follows. In the methodology chapter is provided wider information of the research - indicators that were analysed, the time period that was analysed and justification to analyse content that is published by Latvian ministries on Facebook. In the fifth chapter are presented results of the study – differences between ministries in communication styles, use of visual materials and publishing habits; representation of topics about citizen participation; activity in the commentary section; and most often noticeable communication mistakes. In the sixth chapter is proposed a model that could be used to foster digital participation in Latvia, as well as emphasized the main limitations and opportunities that should be considered in the future development of digital democracy in Latvia.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

In the research are analysed Facebook entries made by Latvian Ministries. In Latvia there are thirteen ministries, and they were selected for the content analysis because ministries as public institutions already are obligated to provide opportunities for citizen participation in the decision-making process. Since 2018 information about citizen participation opportunities must be published on the home page of the institutions (Ministru kabinets, 2018). Nevertheless, nowadays publishing information on the home page of the institution is less than enough, and institutions should also use other digital channels to reach citizens and motivate them to participate in the decision-making process. Therefore, in the research is analysed to what degree ministries are using social media to inform citizens about participation opportunities, as well as how ministries are utilizing digital solutions and two-way communication opportunities that social media are offering.

**Table 1. The indicators of the content analysis**

	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Sub-indicators</b>
<b>1. Content indicators</b>	Use of visual material	Photography; infographic; video material; animation; illustration (picture or stock photo); other; entry where visual material is not used
	Link to external material	Link to an online page (also the home page of the institution); link to other social media; link to online mass media; link to survey; link to participation portal; link to some other content, that is not identified in previous sub-indicators.
	Use of hashtags	Use of hashtags in the text (Yes/No)
	Use of emojis	Use of emoji icons in the text (Yes/No)
	Use of tagging	Type of tagged accounts: Institution; a public official; public establishment; mass media; entrepreneur; non-governmental organisation; community; person; other. The total amount of tagged accounts
<b>2. Message indicators</b>	Informing	Reporting about past events; reporting about current events; information about future events; the activity of the minister or another public official; other
	Educating	Information on the competencies of the institution; future tasks of the institution; report on the results achieved; other

	Engaging	Answer a question or write commentaries; forward the message to followers; follow the link that is published in the entry; watch live stream; respond to survey; participate in the event; other
	Representation of topics about participation	Entries about advisory bodies; entries about public discussions; entries about surveys; entries about elections; entries about other participation opportunities
<b>3. Feedback indicators</b>	Reactions	Use of reaction icons (total amount); Use of negative reaction icons – sad and angry (from the total amount)
	Sharing	Share (total amount)
	Use of commentary section	Commentary (total amount); commentary without reply or reaction from the institution (total amount); how fast institution is replying to commentaries (less than one hour; less than one day; a few days or slower)
	Content of the commentary section	Type of the commentary (question; answer; opinion); an attitude of the commentaries (supportive; negative; neutral)

*Source: Eduards Lielpeters` construction based on objectives of the research*

Content of Facebook pages is analysed because this social media is regularly used by all ministries and it is most often used social media in Latvia – in 2020 there were 1 060 000 Facebook users in Latvia (Napoleon Sp.zo.o., 2020), and it still has a tendency to grow its audience. In September 2020 Facebook pages of ministries had from 1700 to 14000 followers depending on ministry, and only three ministries had less than 3000 followers. Content analysis was implemented in 2020 (from January until April), analysing the content of 13 Facebook pages maintained by Latvian ministries. The period represented in the analysis is six months (from July 2019 until December 2019). In this period all ministries together have published 3181 entries. The analysis was implemented according to three groups of indicators (see Table 1) – content indicators, message indicators and feedback indicators. In the content is analysed text and visual materials; the meaning of the published information, communication style – is it one-way or two-way communication; what digital solutions are implemented to ensure engagement and what feedback is gained from the followers of the Facebook page.

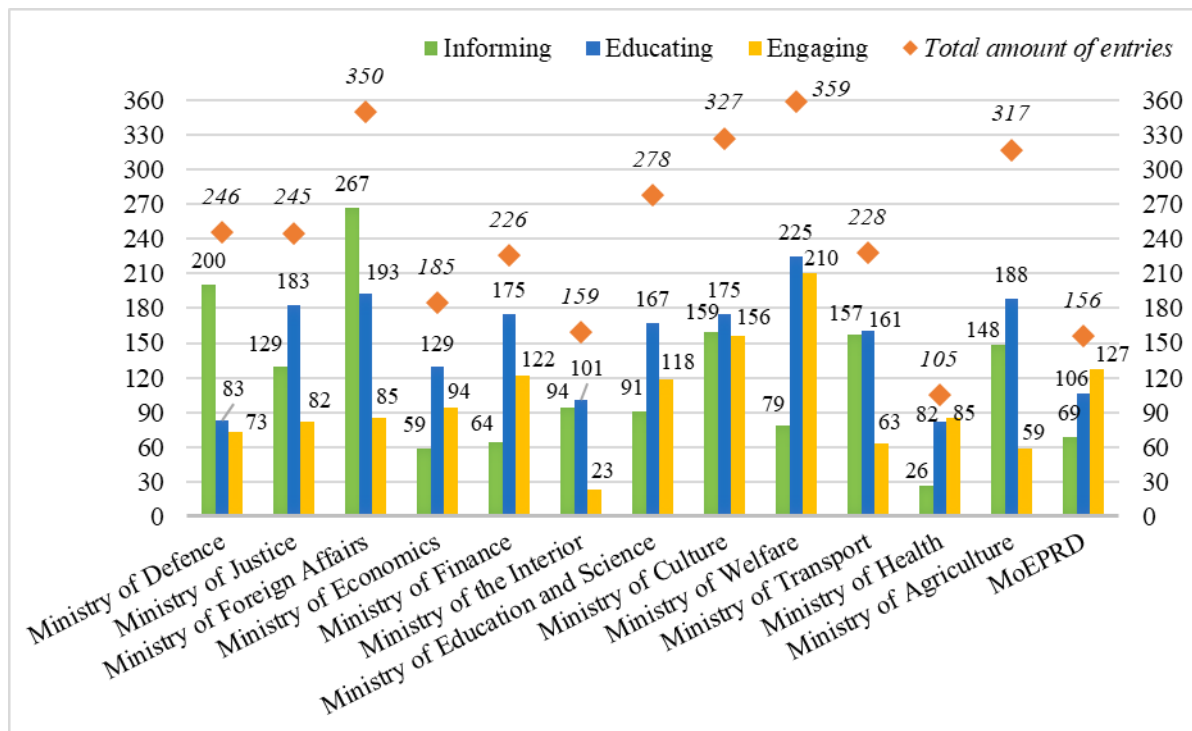
It must be pointed out that analysed data are representing the situation in the period from July until December 2019. Since the Covid-19 crisis started in the first half of the year 2020, the dynamics of the publication intensity has slightly changed for some institutions, especially for the Ministry of Health that became much more active on social media.

## **5. RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

Results of the research are demonstrating that social media activity varies both by institutions and by months – the largest social media activity was in November, but the lowest activity was in July. This difference is determined mainly because of the topical events, however, for some institutions, the vacations of representatives might also be the reason as there are noticeable periods of several days when no entries are made. Usually, most of the ministries are publishing at least one entry per day, however – there are institutions that are more active, such as Ministry of Welfare or Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as there are institutions that are less active, especially Ministry of Health that in the analysed period was publishing information on social media irregularly and made almost four times fewer entries than the most active institution - Ministry of Welfare. Considering frequency and topics of the social media posts, it can be concluded that there is not happening careful planning of the entries – posts often are made according to current events and agenda. Also, it was noticeable that several ministries are regularly and strongly highlighting their ministers – often tagging them in the entries, sharing content from their personal social media accounts, emphasizing their participation in events and quoting them more often than other representatives of the institution. Such disproportion is demonstrating to followers that ministry is only its minister, and is keeping alive prejudice that representatives of an institution are just attending events and shaking hands, hence they are not doing real work and are not trustworthy for cooperation.

In the entries published by Latvian ministries were analysed the meaning of the message in the text and also in the visual material. Meaning of the message was identified as informative, educating or engaging, considering that the same entry could also have several of analysed aspects at the same time, for example, have both

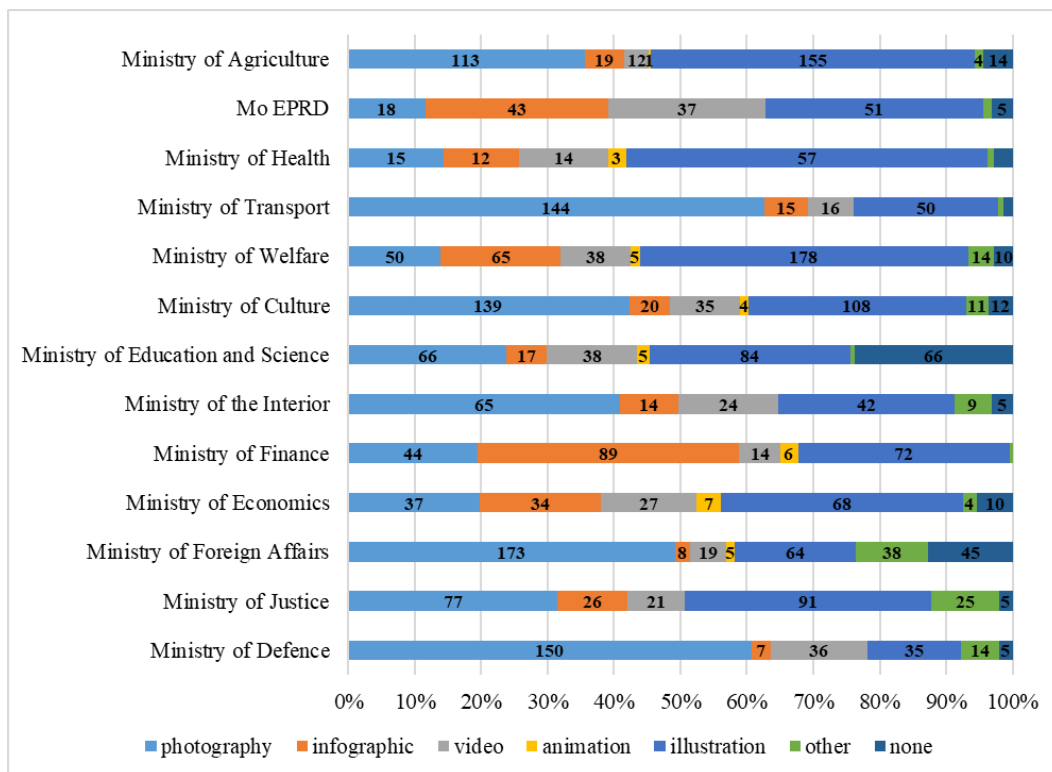
educating and engaging elements. Results of the research demonstrated that from all 3181 entries 49 percent have informative content, 62 percent have educational content and 41 percent have engaging content. When analysing each institution separately, it is noticeable that ministries have different purposes for the use of social media (see Figure 1). For example, the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs are active with publishing messages that are informing about past, current or future events where institution and its representatives are participating. In nine ministries educating entries are published slightly more often than informative entries, for example, Ministry of Welfare and Ministry of Finance are often publishing information that is educating their followers about various matters of their field of competence. Engaging posts are still a minority, hence, communication style still is top-down with the exception in some ministries, such as Ministry of Health, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development.



**Figure 2. Distribution of entries in the Facebook pages of Latvian ministries, July-December 2019**  
*Source: Eduards Lielpeters' construction based on the conducted content analysis in 2020, n=3181*

Appropriate use of visual material and emojis is essential to attract the attention of social media followers and deliver the message. With the successful use of those elements, social media entry can reach a larger audience and ensure that information is not only published but it is also received by the followers. Superficial use of visual elements can result in the lower reach of the message and also lower followers' interest in the content of the social media page. Latvian ministries have very different habits when it comes to the use of visual content in their social media entries (see Figure 3). The most often used content is illustrations – a picture or another visual element that is thematically connected with the message but is not providing real information about the current situation. Most often this solution is used by the Ministry of Agriculture – they are using stock photos to attract attention, but the picture, in general, is not providing any useful information for the followers of the social media page. As often as illustrations are used also photos – from different events and with people and places that are also represented in the message. Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Transport are using this visual element most often. This type of visual element is providing additional information to followers, however, it is useful if followers know the people in the picture or the text is providing additional information what is happening and who are the persons in the picture. Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Welfare are comparatively often using video and animation as a visual element. A good example is the use of infographic that can also provide additional and useful information to followers – the most active in the use of this element was Ministry of Finance, 40 percent from all their entries were with infographics. As a bad example is communication when there is published content without any visual material as it is lowering the possibility

that the entry will reach followers attention. This was a case with 24 percent of entries made by the Ministry of Education and Science and 13 percent of entries made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

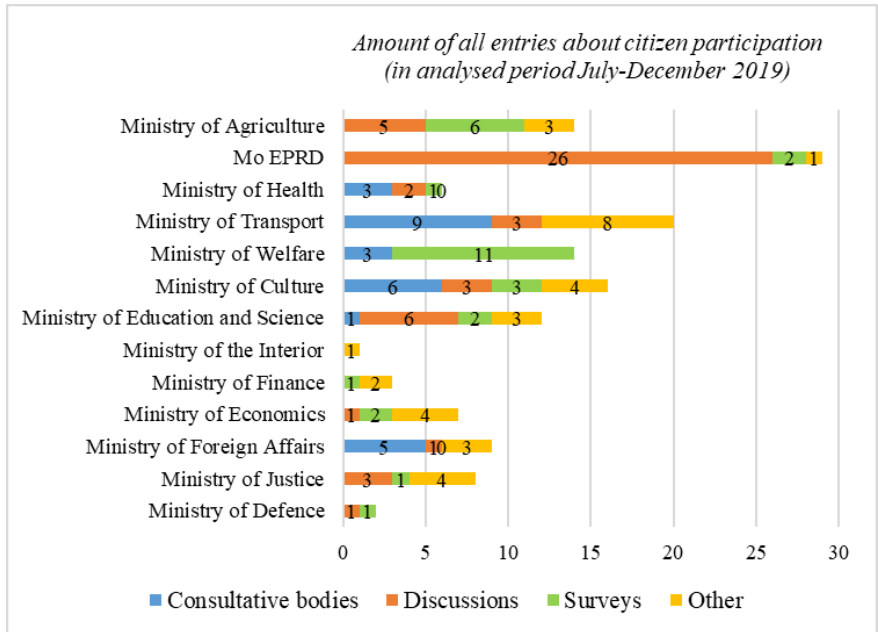


**Figure 3. Use of visual material in the Facebook pages of Latvian ministries (July-December, 2019), amount of entries in each category and their proportion from the total amount of entries**  
*Source: Eduards Lielpeters' construction based on the conducted content analysis in 2020, n=3181*

Entries that are about citizen participation were published rarely (see Figure 4). In the analysed period, there were 141 entries that contained information about citizen participation opportunities or decisions made with the participation of citizens or their representatives, hence, only 4 percent from the total amount of entries. The most active was the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development as they were organising discussions in Latvia about regional reform. However, it must be pointed out that entries made by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development that are counted as containing information about the discussion, thus, are about citizen participation not always can be seen as a good example how to foster citizen participation. Although the information in the entries is motivating citizens to contact with ministry and communicate about regional reform, there is not mentioned that citizens can give their opinion and suggestions how to develop this reform, rather ministry is just providing answers to citizens questions. Hence, citizens are seen not as equal partners, but as recipients of service to which they cannot influence decision-making and final quality.

Although the work of consultative bodies is a regular activity in the ministries, it was mentioned rarely – 27 times in all analysed period and only by some ministries, thus, keeping this process distant from the followers of social media pages. This situation is illustrating a classical problem – institutions are arguing that citizens are passive and are not participating in the decision-making process, at the same time current activities of the decision-making process are not reflected and promoted sufficiently, thus, most of the citizens do not know about them. If ministries are interested to engage more citizens in the decision-making process, they should significantly increase the coverage of current activities where citizens can participate. Results of the content analysis are suggesting that either representatives of ministries do not know how to promote this information or they do not want to promote it, hence – they are not motivated to increase the number of citizens that are participating in the decision-making process.

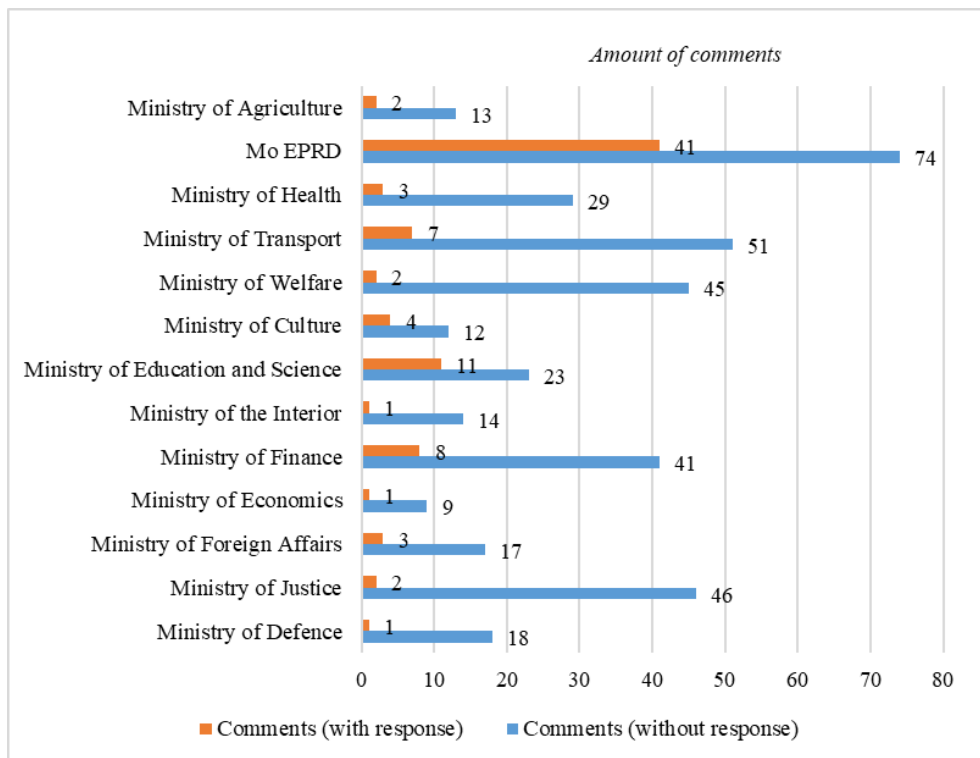




**Figure 4. Entries about citizen participation in the Facebook pages of Latvian ministries, July-December 2019**

*Source: Eduards Lielpeters` construction based on the conducted content analysis in 2020, n=141*

Analysis of the commentary section is providing a very worrying tendency (see Figure 5). Most ministries are using this section selectively – sometimes engaging with followers in discussions but in most of the times ignoring commentaries that are made by followers and even not providing answers in cases when followers are asking questions about information published in the entry. This attitude is demotivating other followers to use the commentary section, thus taking away from social media one of the opportunities that could provide two-way communication and citizen participation in the decision-making process.



**Figure 5. Comments and their responses in the Facebook pages of Latvian ministries, July-December 2019, only those comments where reaction from the institution was needed**

*Source: Eduards Lielpeters` construction based on the conducted content analysis in 2020, n=3181*

At the same time, it must be pointed out that in Figure 5 are demonstrated only those comments where reaction from the institution was needed. In total, entries from all ministries received 3131 commentaries but most of them were not recognised by content analysis as comments to which institution should provide feedback, for example, commentaries where followers are tagging their friends or commentaries containing hate speech. This situation arises dilemma for the representatives of a public institution – should they ignore commentary section because many comments are rude, and it is difficult to distinguish the border which commentary should be answered, and which should be ignored. The differentiation becomes even harder, as it was also noticeable, that sometimes questions which should be answered was written in an angry manner, thus looking like a hate speech. For now, results of the content analysis are suggesting that too often representatives of ministries are choosing to ignore commentary section than try to develop dialogue. Losers in this situation are citizens that would like to communicate with institutions in a manner that is the easiest for them – on social media.

In the content analysis were recognised several common mistakes that are made by the content creators in the Facebook accounts of Latvian ministries: ignoring commentary section and not providing answers even when followers are asking reasonable questions; having high proportion with informative entries where minister or other public official is attending event, but not providing additional information about decisions made or context of the event; republishing the same entry several times or republishing the same visual material several times; using tagging option not only for those mentioned in the entry but also for those only thematically connected with the subject; publishing several pictures from event without providing information what is happening in the picture or who are the people in it; in case of some important event publish many entries in a short period of time, having quantity over quality; not adding visual material to entry or relaying on automatic thumbnail from link as a visual material; emphasizing important text using caps lock not emojis; sharing social media entries or other outside materials without providing at least one sentence as a context why this has been shared with followers. Avoiding those mistakes could help institutions to demonstrate their followers that institutions are interested in communication and cooperation with citizens, therefore increasing the number of followers and developing a better two-way dialogue with citizens. At the same time results of the content analysis demonstrated that there are also many good examples when institutions are successfully interacting with followers, using well-considered visual materials and utilizing digital opportunities that social media can offer. Therefore, to learn from good examples and also common mistakes, more often experience exchange between content creators would be needed or there should be developed for all public institutions common digital communication policy or guidelines.

## **6. MODEL FOR FOSTERING DIGITAL PARTICIPATION**

Considering the results of the research, the author is proposing the model for fostering digital participation in Latvia. For the successful implementation of the model there should be taken into account also a specific regional situation of Latvia, hence, limitations and opportunities that are impacting the development of digital democracy in Latvia. The main limitations for citizen participation in the decision-making process in Latvia are:

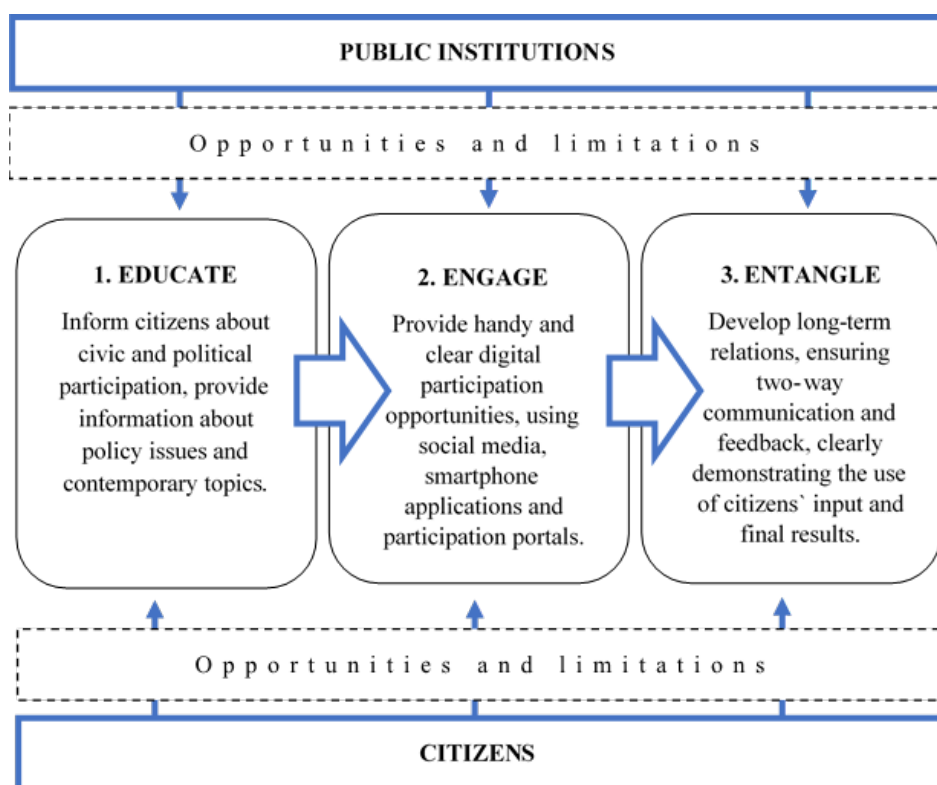
- Financial aspects – results from citizen participation cannot be measured immediately, therefore, it is a challenge for public institutions to justify the need for financial input as there are many other positions in the national budget where the money is needed;
- Citizens will to participate – citizens are not interested in the decision-making process or do not have time for participation;
- Citizens motivation to participate – citizens are not believing that their opinion matters or they are trusting that public administration knows what they are doing;
- Education – citizens have limited knowledge about participation and democracy, thus, participation opportunities must be provided together with information about the value of civic and political participation;
- Choice of information channels – citizens are not one homogeneous group, their habits of information gathering and mass media consumption may vary depending on age, financial status, education level and other factors. Representatives of public administration have to follow tendencies and use those information channels that can reach citizens;

- Public administrations` will to communicate with citizens – considering that citizens participation in the decision-making process is extending the process, there is a risk that representatives of public administration can decide to skip this step. Also, it is easier to keep alive the common comprehension, that citizens are not competent enough to be able to participate in the decision-making process than develop information campaigns or provide access to information;
- Citizens skills to be able to participate – the level of citizens digital skills can affect their ability to engage in online communication and provide their input.

Thoughtful implementation of the model for fostering digital participation could help to tackle citizens limitations. The bigger challenge is limitations in the side of public institutions that can be solved or reduced either by external pressure or decision of the upper management. Although there are various limitations in Latvia that are affecting citizens ability of digital participation in the decision-making process, there are also several opportunities that are specific to Latvia, thus, can be used in favour to better development of digital democracy:

- Availability and speed of the Internet – access to the internet is in most households in Latvia and speed of the internet is one of the fastest in the EU. Also, the use of mobile internet is growing in Latvia;
- The current online representation of citizens and institutions – citizens and public institutions already are represented in the digital environment, implementation of digital participation in the decision-making process would be logical next step to develop closer digital relations between institutions and society;
- Current availability of online public services – between the EU countries Latvia is one of the good examples in the access of digital public services, in this aspect cooperation between institutions and citizens is already happening;
- Comparatively small population – in a country with less than 2 million citizens also public administration is comparatively small, thus, it is easier to implement improvements faster and with participation of all the corresponding stakeholders;
- International institutional support and expertise – in the EU recently is growing strong support towards public sector digitalisation and necessity to foster democracy and citizen participation, also Latvia`s participation in Open Government Partnership is providing support to the future development of digital democracy in Latvia;
- Current ideological support in the national legislation – in strategic documents is clearly stated need to foster citizen participation. Also, legislation that is regulating stakeholders participation already now does not restrict individual participation and digital solutions, thus it is a decision of representatives of the institution if current participation methods are supplemented with digital solutions.

The proposed model for fostering digital participation is demonstrating digital relations between citizens and public institutions, that are impacted by opportunities and limitations (both from the side of citizens and the side of public institutions). Digital relations are developed in three levels that must be reached gradually (see Figure 6). In the first level (Educate), citizens are receiving information that is educating them about civic and political participation and certain policy issues to ensure that they are competent and motivated to participate in the decision-making process. This first level is strengthening citizens ability and motivation to participate in the decision-making process, hence tackling some of the main limitations that are hindering citizen participation in Latvia. The first level is followed by the second level (Engage) - participation part where digital solutions are used to gain citizens opinions and engage them in the decision-making process, with the aim to design public policies and regulations that are more successfully meeting citizens needs and expectations. In this level participation can also still be a one-time activity, to develop participation as a habit the presence of the third level is needed. The third level (Entangle) is encouraging citizens to trust in public institutions and the participation process. That is reached by providing feedback on citizens input and demonstrating final results that are gained with the help of citizens participation.



**Figure 6. Model for fostering digital participation**

*Source: Eduards Lielpeters' construction*

In the model an important role is given to use of social media, because that is the current sector of digital environment where citizens and public institutions are already represented and have potential to strengthen cooperation. However, it must be emphasized that there is only a certain degree how much social media can be used for citizens participation. For now, social media cannot serve to confirm the identity of the person, thus, they can be used to gain simple opinions and ideas from citizens or to understand public mood, but, when citizens are providing their input for the final decision, for example, voting about one of the ideas that should be implemented, there must be used other digital solutions such as participation portal or institutions home page where person's credentials can be approved by e-signature or other authentication tools that are accepted in Latvia.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Considering that only one-third of Latvian citizens trust in public institutions and government, to improve the situation, it is very important to assure in public communication that citizens opinion is valued by public institutions. For now, in public communication is insufficiently emphasized that stakeholders' participation is needed in the decision-making process and rarely is demonstrated how it was considered and applied when the final decision was made;

In Latvia, most citizens are not participants of non-governmental organisations. It is undoubtedly that in this silent majority there are people that have knowledge and ideas about certain issues where they could provide useful input for the decision-making process. Digital solutions could help to ease their participation in the decision-making process;

Results of the content analysis are demonstrating that for now, institutions have various and noticeably different habits in the use of digital opportunities that social media are offering for content creation, network building and two-way communication. Model for fostering digital participation is proposing more thoughtful activity of public administration on the digital environment - changing current top-down communication style to more inclusive and citizen-centric.

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