



Active citizenship and young people

Qualitative research in the Czech Republic

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Methodology

15 in-depth interviews with young active citizens

In total, 15 citizens under the age of 26 took part in the interviews, 8x male and 7x female. In addition to age, the main criterion for their selection was whether they are civically involved, e.g. in the areas of politics, their community (e.g. village, school), volunteering, civic activism, etc.

20 focus groups

Young people aged 13 to 19 (respectively 26), across Czech regions. A total of 456 young citizens participated, 198x male and 258x female.

Main questions:

Why are some young people civically active? What motivates them?

Why are young people mostly not civically active? What barriers do they face?

What would help young people to be more civically active?

What civic engagement tools are attractive to young people? And Why?

Key findings

INTEREST IN ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The in-depth interviews also make it apparent that there are young citizens who have engaged from a very early age, though they often had favourable conditions for citizen engagement, an inspiring environment and a relatively active personal mindset. The situation looks less optimistic from the perspective of the discussion groups, where the more general population of 13- to 19-year-olds was represented. Given that they are often unaware of the possibilities and benefits of active citizenship, they are not very civically active yet. Those who are active have experience with volunteering or some minor environmental work party. Some do engage in useful civic activities but do not realise that their activities yield such a benefit or that they can be considered civic engagement, e.g. volunteer firefighters in smaller municipalities.

It also seems that the topic of active citizenship was more likely to interest girls in the discussion groups, especially in primary schools and secondary vocational schools. They were more willing to discuss and were more up-to-date on current issues. Among boys, the topic resonated more in grammar school groups, where some of them even showed that they were knowledgeable about current political issues.

The topic of active citizenship is not attractive (“cool”) enough yet among peers to render it more commonplace and part of a young citizen’s persona.

Key findings

CONTEXT OF THE ERA AND INTEREST IN THE TOPICS

Several important issues have influenced young citizens in recent years: firstly the covid-19 pandemic, which forced them to follow current events in regard to government measures. Many of them took note of the case of the former MP Dominik Feri, who, as someone near to them in age, brought politics closer to them. That made the case of sexual violence associated with him even worse for them.

Another important element influencing young people's mindset is social networks, especially Instagram and TikTok, which they mainly use for entertainment. On the other hand, some of them also follow current events on these networks, but it is often selective and greatly abridged.

Issues that resonate with young people include: problems related to the school environment (e.g. dissatisfaction with the education system); rights of the LGBTQ+ community; the environment; low awareness of mental health; the Russian war in Ukraine; the absence of dialogue between generations; sexual violence and sexuality in general. Another important theme that came out of individual interviews with young active people was interest in their own communities.

Key findings

PERCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY, ACTIVISM AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

In the group discussions, democracy was mostly associated with freedom, elections, politics and thus the principle of representation. Democracy was less frequently associated with non-electoral citizen engagement. **Unfamiliarity with the term “civil society”** was common to all of the groups of participants, so it is likely that schools do not pay much attention to it or to the meaning of engaged citizenship.

They associated activism with escalated actions intended to attract attention. Most were not in favour of this approach, although they recognise that some problems in the world need attention, such as the climate crisis.

For most, an active citizen was a person who goes to work, votes, pays taxes and takes care of their family. There were fewer mentions of an “active citizen” who, in addition to the above, enhances his/her community, keeps himself/herself informed, possibly runs for office, looks for solutions rather than problems and educates himself/herself.

These findings show that active citizenship and building civil society are still not as high a priority as they need to be.

Key findings

MOTIVATION FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The school environment is motivational if the topic of citizenship and everything related to it is taken seriously and if it is reflected in other subjects. When teachers and school leaders are interested in what young people think and the topics they are currently grappling with, it helps them and encourages them to be active. It also helps if teachers use discussion as a method in the classroom and engage in the discussion themselves. Project-based learning is ideal for developing the autonomy and creativity that civil society so fervently needs. The topic of citizenship requires both theoretical knowledge and contact with practice, ideally through examples, e.g. discussions with (young) citizens who are already active. This makes the topic more attractive and thus aspirational for young people. It is extremely important to give children a degree of autonomy in the school environment, e.g. to enable them to take part in running the school parliament with a real impact on the running of the school community.

Particularly in individual interviews with young active citizens, it was evident that active citizens are more often “recruited” from better-off and more educated family backgrounds, where politics and public affairs are normal topics of discussion, where parents may engage in some civic activity themselves and take their children along (e.g. going to demonstrations, being active in the local community, participating in environmental work parties, etc.). These children are more likely to develop an active civic attitude before the age of 15. Of course, even passive and disadvantaged family environments can activate young people; these individuals are typically motivated to break away from their environment. In these cases it is important that the parent, grandparent or older sibling support the child in independent decision-making and respectful behaviour.

Among peers, stories of individuals who are active and have already achieved something carry weight. If a friend is active, it is easier for peers to try it out, too. This is true in both the offline and online environments. If users follow profiles on networks that deal with current affairs (like “I’m in the know”) and civically active influencers/Youtubers (Kovy, Lukefree, etc.), they can become role models for them.

Individual interviews with young active people revealed a common feature: they are not indifferent to what is happening in their surroundings. They are more frequently extroverted and have no problem expressing their opinion, they are convinced that their efforts are worthwhile, or they have set a strong sense of doing good. They are also aware that civic engagement can bring them benefits in terms of experience and their career (e.g. they may learn how to organise or promote something, etc.).

Key findings

OBSTACLES TO ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

An obstacle that also has untapped potential is the Czech school environment. During discussions and workshops, young people generally admitted that civic education at school is one of the less important subjects and that teachers of other subjects do not consider it important. Additionally, there is no practical instruction of civic education. The art of leading discussion among pupils/students, taking an interest in their opinions, helping to develop ideas and working with their inner motivation is also often absent in the school environment. School parliaments, which tend to exist more as formal structures but have no actual impact on the school environment, were viewed as demotivating.

The family environment is extremely important for an individual's civic development, with the capacity to positively stimulate, hinder or practically erase it. In families with a poor socio-economic situation, citizenship may be relegated to the back burner for all practical purposes because they do not associate it with any benefits that are important to them. In better-off, materially and performance-oriented families, children tend to be overwhelmed by extracurricular activities and pressure to succeed in school. In such environments, parents are sometimes unaware of the importance of civil society development and use the wider community and society more like an "economic ladder". Some participants in the discussions felt that their parents and grandparents had not trusted their judgement or respected their views in the past, which leads to a preference for not talking about political and social issues in discussions at home.

Active citizenship is not yet "cool" enough among peers, and in some (school) groups, individuals can be slightly stigmatized for even taking an interest in public affairs.

The consumption of social networks (Instagram and TikTok) as practically the only media can result in users getting a very selective view of the world, and they may miss contextual information that is important to understand an issue/topic.

Of course, young citizens' own personalities and internal processes also play a role in their active attitude. Doubting whether they can do anything on their own anyway, being afraid of standing out, or feeling that it is an adult world to which they have not been invited and in which they are poorly represented, are typical. They feel under-informed about opportunities to become engaged, or they are simply uninterested in the topic - and it is important to remember that not everyone will ever be active, e.g. introverts find it harder to overcome their inner and perhaps less assertive selves.

Key findings

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

Naturally, discussion participants were most familiar with elections as a tool for asserting “their will”; some aged 15-16 and older also mentioned petitions or demonstrations, or pressure actions by environmental activists, as civic tools. Some had experience with petitions from school, and were more likely to have heard about demonstrations and pressure activism in the media. When we presented other tools to them, they found those that lead to direct confrontation and require activity especially in the offline world less attractive; they were also not very in favour of joining a party or association. Conversely, the preferred tools were mainly those that could be done in the online world, such as online petitions or creating engaged content on social media or podcasts. The offline tools they found appealing included volunteering and various discussion and decision-making platforms that could work/are working at school (debate club, school parliament or magazine) or in their city/neighbourhood (e.g. getting involved in a participatory budget and proposing their own project to improve their community).

We also asked respondents to envision their ideal online tool for civic participation. They said that such a tool should be “connecting”, “educational” and “inspiring”. For example, they suggested a “connecting platform” as a virtual place where users would share their ideas for civic initiatives and projects across regions; or a “civic learning platform” as an Instagram or TikTok profile that inspires and educates on ways to participate.