

State Educational Policy in the Sphere of Social Sciences in Latvia - Expert Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores whether the state educational policy in the sphere of social sciences fosters development of an educated and active civil society. This subject is topical as the political participation in relation to the election activity is gradually decreasing. The research aims to study the state educational policy in the sphere of social sciences which, according to the political participation theoreticians, is an especially important factor in the transition countries and new democracies for raising public awareness of the opportunities provided by democracy and the importance of participation. The theoretical part of the research is based on the theory of communicative rationality by J. Habermas, theory about the relation of education, active civil society and democracy by J. Dewey, and authors like Walter Parker and John Jarolimek expanding on the theoretical relation between mastering of social sciences and civic participation. The analytical part of the research is based on the country's long-term and medium-term planning documents. During the research, face-to-face surveys of 12th grade students were carried out, and education experts were interviewed. The study leads to a conclusion that in general the state educational policy in the sphere of social sciences gives theoretical knowledge about a democratic state system and its basic values. The expert interviews that were carried out allow concluding that the explanation for the above-mentioned survey findings is the preparation of teachers, the amount of time required for the acquisition of social sciences and the balance of.

Keywords: civil society, civic participation, youth, planning, policy, education.

Introduction

Theoretical framework

Linking of social sciences to an active and educated civic participation and succession of democratic values is a rather recent phenomenon, and its theoretical base has gradually developed and established itself over the course of the 20th century. One of the most influential 20th century authors is American philosopher, psychologist and educational reform creator John Dewey, who emphasized the importance of education in fostering of "thinking" and active citizens.¹ He believed that the precondition of democracy is active and educated civil society that is able to critically evaluate political processes and adopt such political decisions, which would serve the interests of the entire society.² Whereas critical thinking and information processing capabilities, understanding of the political processes in a democratic country and civic participation are based on the elements, encouraging civic participation, which have been integrated in the education and the program.

The ideas of J. Dewey, expressed in the work "*Citizenship and the Critical Role of Social Studies*" are conceptually close to Washington University professors Walter Parker and John Jarolimek. They emphasize that democracy is the only political regime, which is based on the civic participation, knowledge and critical opinion of the people, living in it, and the formation of civil society.³ Whereas the social science studies allow accumulating the volume of knowledge and skills necessary for the democracy, looking at the values and development of democracy from various perspectives, encouraging critical thinking and information analysis skills and also creation awareness of the necessity to get involved in political and social processes. W. Parker and J. Jarolimek also emphasize the importance of the multiplying effect of education, namely – the individuals are passing over their knowledge to their families, friends and encourage them to learn and master the skills, which are needed to form an analytical opinion. This all enforces the ability of the civil society to make collective decisions

¹ Dewey, John. 1916. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan, 23.

² Ibid.

³ Parker, Walter, John Jarolimek. 1984. *Citizenship and the Critical Role of the Social Studies*. New York: The National Council for the Social Studies, 6.

in a structured manner, to get involved in processes and to choose most suitable candidates to represent the interests of the population.¹

In order to embed democratic values in children and young people, J. Dewey stressed the role of schools and teachers in encouraging curiosity about the surrounding world, which is gradually focused on the main conditions of functioning of a democratic state. The American theoretician indicates that curiosity is a significant factor in stimulating the thinking process of the individual and encouraging the cognitive process. On the other hand, a teacher is the main contributor of curiosity. It is determined by the abilities of the teacher to induce thinking and critical assessment skills. The ability of the teacher to stimulate independent thinking among the children and young people on the issues, addressed during the lesson, directly depends on the presentation methods. He emphasizes the importance of practical linking, namely, children and young people should be provided with not only theoretical knowledge of politics, state, society and democratic features, but also should be given a physical link with the content of the teachings, for example, by meeting with politicians, representatives of non-governmental organizations, holding discussion panels and giving practical critical thinking and civic participation tasks. This means that both the teacher and the content of the education, which should have a practical aspect, plays an important role in the creation of active and educated citizens.

One of the axioms postulated by the aforementioned authors is that the main task of the social sciences is creation of "good citizens. Some authors differ on what it means to "be a good citizen". Civic participation theoretician Joel Vesthaimer states that a "good citizen" is socially active, able to reflect on current social and political subjects and get involved in resolution of problems. Other authors indicate also involvement of the individual in various social and political practices. Whereas J. Dewey expresses an opinion that democracy is "lifestyle, which is based on active interaction of citizens" and "a good citizen is the one, who is part of this citizen interaction".

Education and social science studies are particularly important aspects in "transitional" nations or in places, where there has been a recent transition from authoritarian or totalitarian regime to a democratic government. The Slovakian scholar Elena Bianchi has addressed linkage of social studies and democracy in the post-Soviet domain in her publication *Fighting With Post-Totalitarian Ghosts: Civic Education and Good Citizenship in Slovakia (2008)*. The outcome of her research emphasizes importance of teachers in the succession of democratic values and the process of formation of youth civic participation. Having conducted several interviews with civic education and political teachers in various Slovakian schools, E. Bianchi reveals that part of the interviewed teachers have indicated active civic participation as measure of a "good citizen", whereas others expressed an opinion that a "good citizen" in a democratic society is best characterized by law abundance, which, in accordance with the conclusions made by the Slovakian author, still indicates certain manifestations of totalitarianism in the Slovakian education system.² The role of the social sciences in transitional nations is also explained by the Freiburg University professors Denis Dafflon and Nicolas Hayoz. Authors express an opinion in their study *How Social Sciences Can Contribute to Changing a Society (2016)* that social science disciplines help developing the national transition regime models and identify the best course of development.³ It is crucial to mention that representatives of social sciences are best positioned to identify and "measure" the problems, inherent to the society, to describe them and to offer corresponding solutions for the decision-makers and political actors. At last, representatives of social sciences are mostly those who inform the society with their analysis of whether the power processes can be interpreted as democratic and whether there are signs of returning authoritarianism, and students and teachers of social sciences are the ones, promoting democratic values within the society and ensuring their succession.

One of the most influential thinkers of the 20th and the 21st century is the German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas, who had studied such issues concerning power legitimacy, importance of civil society within the framework of democratic government and ensuring of democratic succession during his academic career and has also studied the factors, which create the discussion culture of the civil society and formulation of successful argumentation in the public domain. The public domain according to J. Habermas is defined as informal, dynamic, varying and interactive structures, present in the civil society, the activity of which results in creation of the critical opinion of the society on processes and

¹ Ibid.

² Bianchi, Elena. 2008. *Fighting With Post-Totalitarian Ghosts: Civic Education and Good Citizenship in Slovakia*. Budapest: Central Eastern University, 37.

³ Dafflon, Denis and Nicolas Hayoz. 2016. *How Social Sciences Can Contribute to Changing a Society*. Fribourg: Fribourg University, 3.

also ensuring power legitimacy and succession of democracy.¹ The basis of the concept of the public domain is formed by fundamental freedoms of democracy – the possibility of individuals to gather, unite and freely discuss matters related to the existing government and current inherent problems of the society. However, a certain amount of knowledge and skills, which allows for efficient involvement in the public domain, where education and social science studies play a crucial role, is required for the freedoms, offered by the democracy, to become implemented in practice.

Social sciences shape the understanding of the individual on the democratic state, duties of the citizen towards the state and society, and also helps mastering the necessary knowledge and skills so that the individual would be able to successfully collaborate with other members of the society, to implement his or her interests and demand responsibility from the persons in the possession of power. This thesis creates a close connection among the previously described theoretical statements of various authors on the link between the social sciences and the democracy, on which the empiric results of the study will be based.

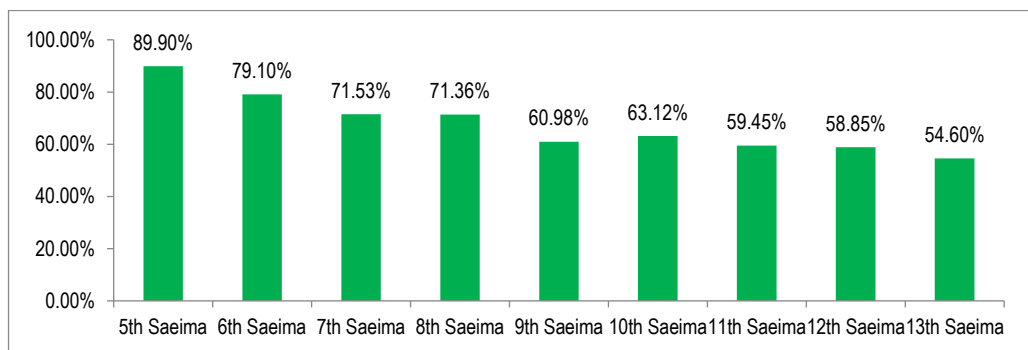
Results

Document analysis

Latvia is a relatively young parliamentary democracy, which restored its independence in 1991, by transitioning from a totalitarian regime to a democratic government. First section of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia stipulates that Latvia is an independent democratic republic.² It follows from here that preservation of national sovereignty and strengthening of democracy are the main goals of the state, to which all laws, planning documents, political initiatives as well as the activities of the politicians, mass media and the civil society are subordinate. Education and mastering of social sciences are one of the corner stones, ensuring strengthening of democratic consciousness and continuity of democratic values, since they allow the individual to gain understanding of both democracy and also be encouraged to active civic participation and taking regular interest in political processes. Since restoration of independency Latvia is experiencing gradual decline of electoral activity (see Chart No 1).

Chart No 1

Proportion of voting residents from all eligible population



Source: Chart created by the author, using the data of the Central Election Commission.³

The displayed results indicate gradual decline of participation in the parliamentary elections during the period from the 5th Saeima elections in 1993 to the 13th Saeima elections in 2018. It also shows a prominent declining trend in the municipal

¹ Flinn, Jeffrey. Communicative Power in Habermas's Theory of Democracy. *European Journal of Political Theory*. 3, 440. SAGE Publications DOI: 10.1177/1474885104045914

² Constitution of the Republic of Latvia: Law of the Republic of Latvia. Chapter one. General provisions. 01.07.1993. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 43.

³ Central Election Commission. Elections. Saeima elections. European Parliament elections. Municipal elections. See activity of all elections <https://www.cvk.lv/pub/public/27483.html>

and European Parliament elections (see Chart No 8 and No 9 in the annex).¹ The rapid decline of the political participation of the Latvian population has two explanations. First, political participation of Latvian citizens is closely linked to the trust of the residents in the government institutions, political parties and the fact that positive change in social-economic and political processes can be achieved through elections. If the people do not believe in the possibilities offered by the democracy and do not trust the government institutions, then it is understandable that a decline of political activity in the elections results. At the end of 2018 the public opinion poll, conducted by the research centre TNS showed that only 18% of the Latvian residents “fully” or “rather” trust the political parties; the Cabinet enjoyed the trust of 34%, whereas Saeima was trusted by 24% of the respondents.² Another explanation of the declining political participation is related to the civic education of the people and the understanding of necessity to get involved in the democratic processes. Part of the Latvian society acquired education during the time when Latvia was integrated in the Soviet Union, where democratic ideas and civic duties towards democracy were not allowed in the education content. Despite the fact that Latvia has been an independent democratic nation for almost 30 years, awareness of the possibilities, provided by the democracy is only gradually settling in the minds of the people. Therefore the educational and social science factor is of particular importance in the Latvian context, for it establishes understanding of the necessity to get involved in the politics among children and young people and also provides basis for knowledge of such important concepts as state, democracy, civic duties and responsibility. However, previous research on the civic education level of young people reveal that only 19% of the young people in Latvia understand what is democracy and civil society, while in Estonia this indicator reaches 43%.³ Therefore, both the declining electoral activity and level of trust to the government institutions and the level of civic education level of young people indicate existence of faults in the educational policy in the sphere of social sciences in Latvia.

Pursuant to the first section of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, Latvia is an independent democratic republic.⁴ Therefore both the state and the education planning documents and the content of education should be formed in accordance with the aforementioned norm of the law with the purpose of strengthening democracy and ensuring sovereignty of the country. The top ranking long-term development document of Latvia “2030 Sustainable Development Strategy” (SDS) defines the development vision of Latvia, to which the development priorities and courses of action are subordinate. The long-term planning document presents several factors, which have close link to the critical thinking and social sciences as a significant factor in the understanding, which the people have of the current situation, their effect on the society and development of the state, as well as the modelling of the potential solutions and the public discourse.

2030 SDS stipulates that human capital is the basis of the development of Latvia.⁵ The necessity to invest in population stems from here, which mean access to education for all population groups regardless of the age and abilities, which would mean performance of dedicated reforms in the education system. The purpose of the reform would be to encourage such qualities and skills as creative and critical thinking at the level of general education – argumentation skills, which would drive the student towards creation of new ideas and involvement in a reasoned discussion to encourage development of their ideas. The study undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Science „Analytical description of the ecosystem of social and humanitarian sciences (SHS)” (2016) specifies that the due to increasing labour market competition, large amount of information available in the Internet and other factors the knowledge, offered by the social and humanitarian sciences, as well as the skills in critical and analytical thinking, communication, innovation capacity and creative approach towards problem and conflict resolution become increasingly important.⁶ In this sphere the state should ensure education content and preparation of teachers in accordance with the aforementioned transformations of the labour market and information exchange, at the same time reinforcing the democratic awareness of the population. 2030 SDS emphasizes the important of the social science disciplines – political science, sociology, anthropology and economics in the promotion

¹ Ibid.

² Reference from LETA.

³ Čakse, Ireta. Civic-educated citizens are a matter of national security. 24.07.2018. *Lv Portāls*. <https://lvportals.lv/viedokli/297506-pilsoniski-izglitiba-iedzivotaji-ir-valsts-drosibas-jautajums-2018>

⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Latvia: Law of the Republic of Latvia. Chapter one. General provisions. 01.07.1993. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 43.

⁵ Communication on approval of 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia: Law of the Republic of Latvia. 29.06.2010. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. 2010/101, 8.

⁶ Kunda, Ilona et al. 2016. Sociālo un humanitāro zinātņu (SHZ) ekosistēmas analītisks apraksts. Rīga: Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 5.

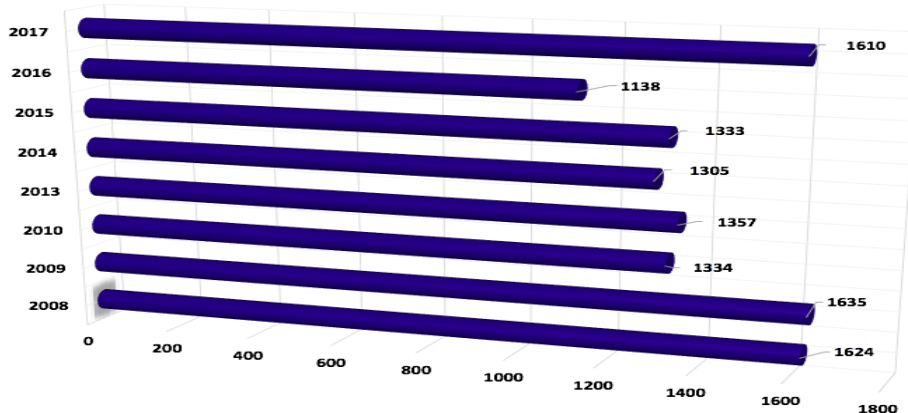
of understanding of democratic and national processes.¹ This planning document emphasizes that studying of social sciences encourages creativity, develops critical thinking skills and provided people with the volume of knowledge and skills, required by the democratic society.

The next top ranking planning document is the *Latvian National Development Plan* (hereinafter in the text – the NDP), which formulates the medium-term development vision of Latvia. The goal and priorities of NDP should be closely linked to the 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy; however, NDP states other priorities as the long-term development document. The main purpose of the medium-term development, defined by the NDP, is national economic advancement that could be achieved by mastering information technologies, exact sciences and languages, which would encourage competitiveness of Latvian economics and allow creating products and services with high added value.² The priorities of encouraging civic participation and developing of creative and critical thinking, included in the Latvian long-term development document, **fail to appear** in the medium-term planning document. This means that a gap is forming at the highest development planning level between the long-term and the medium-term development priorities, where the importance of social and humanitarian sciences is emphasized in long-term perspective, whereas the medium-term planning document focuses on the so called STEM (*science, technology, engineering, mathematics*) or exact sciences.

Reduction of the state-financed study places for social sciences at the higher education level serves as one of evidence of the fact that social science studies are enjoying less attention as the exact sciences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Number of state-funded study places in social science programs



Source: Ministry of Education and Science.³

The number of state-funded study places in the social science programs has decreased over the course of ten years, which contradicts the importance of social science disciplines in encouraging of civic participation and creativity, mentioned in the 2030 SDS. Data in Figure 1 demonstrate that in practice the Latvian education system is rather subject to the medium-

¹ Communication on approval of 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia: Law of the Republic of Latvia. 29.06.2010. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. 2010/101, 8.

² On the 2014-2020 National Development Plan of Latvia: Law of the Republic of Latvia. 09.01.2013. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. 2013/6.11, 3.

³ Ministry of Education and Science. *Education. Higher education. Higher education financing model. State-funded study places in 2018*. <http://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/izglitiba/augstaka-izglitiba/augstakas-izglibas-finansanas-modelis/valsts-budzeta-finansetas-studiju-vietas-2018->

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term planning document than the national long-term development strategy. Expert interviews were conducted to provide a more inclusive view on the subject at hand. Education expert Aija Kļaviņa explains the increasing role of the exact sciences with the assumption that social sciences seem less “attractive” from the perspective of national economy than IT specialists, engineers and mathematicians, since the actual contribution in the form of the gross domestic product from the social sciences is probably distinctly less. The expert revealed that exact science studies, as well as information technology programs have a powerful lobby in Latvia, as the banks and the leading IT companies are lacking in employees with corresponding qualification, therefore the companies invest a lot of money to have this issue resolved at national level. Next factor, which affects a better mastering of social science disciplines, is also the attitude of the parents toward social sciences and the understanding of whether in-depth studies of social sciences (this applies both to school and university level) will enable the young person to create a career and earn a decent living; namely, the expert believes that the parents often assume that young people can earn more with exact science programs. Considering the gradual decrease of state-funded places in the social science programs and increasing emphasis on the exact sciences, the role of the civic education gained in primary and secondary schools is increasing – the primary and the secondary schools have to provide a sufficient volume of knowledge and skills in relation to the critical thinking and civic participation to enable the young people to understand the basic elements of functioning of the state, democratic values and would be aware of themselves as part of an active civil society regardless of the chosen study program. Senior school specialist of the General education school department, Ludmila Margeviča states that school provides individual with theoretical knowledge of the state. In turn, basic knowledge of the state is expected at the university. Civic position of the individual is formed at the university, just as the first notions for those, who intend to get involved in politics in the future – they will be our future national leaders or government officials, who will have to bear great responsibility for their actions as a politician.

Education Law stipulates that primary education is mandatory in Latvia, while secondary education is a voluntary choice of young people and their parents, based on availability of secondary education and social-economic circumstances. It follows from here that, upon graduating from 9th grade, the knowledge and skills of young people should be sufficient to allow them efficiently getting involved in the national and social processes. One of the most challenging aspects in this context is the fact that a young person becomes a lawful member of the civil society at the age of 18, which is regulated in Latvia by the Law on Elections of the Republic City Council and Municipality Council,¹ the Law on Elections of Saeima,² as well as the Elections to the European Parliament Law.³ This means that there is a gap between the graduation from 9th grade and first active participation in elections.

In regard to the content included in the social sciences and the applied teaching methods, the National Centre for Education has developed guidelines on the subjects to be included in the study process and the competences and skills to be mastered, putting emphasis on the necessity to involve students in the exchange of opinions. Education expert Aija Kļaviņa, who was interviewed within the framework of the study, states that the content of the social science disciplines to be mastered both in primary and in secondary school has been designed so that theory makes up for one third of the total time specified for these study subjects, whereas the remaining two third are intended for practical participation, for example, discussions, group works, excursions, which largely depend on the personal initiative of the teacher. At the same time the expert expresses an opinion that one of the most problematic issues in the general education system of Latvia at the moment is preparedness of teachers and motivation to seek new solutions, oriented towards practical involvement, which would encourage their interest in political processes and also promote civic participation in long-term perspective. Specifically, the vision of the teacher, applied methods and creating interest in events that take place around and involvement in them determines the attitude of the students towards information consumption, cooperation with other people and attitude towards their own place in democratic society. Senior officer of the National Centre for Education Sandra Falka suggests development of an individual course on different public administration, political and law elements, designed specifically for the teachers, as one of the possible solutions.

A separate study subject “Politics and Law” has been developed for the Grades 10 to 12, the purpose of which is to promote interest in politics among young people and encourage understanding of the importance of civic participation in the process

¹ Law on Elections of the Republic City Council and Municipality Council: Law of the Republic of Latvia. Chapter two. Election rights. 25.01.1994. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 10.

² Law on Elections of Saeima: Law of the Republic of Latvia. Chapter one. General Provisions. 06.06.1995. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 86.

³ Law on Elections of the Republic City Council and Municipality Council: Law of the Republic of Latvia. Chapter two. Election rights. 25.01.1994. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 10.

of formation of society and state.¹ Mastering this study subject ensures that the knowledge, gained at primary school level, is reinforced and avoids the three-year gap between the mastering of theoretical knowledge up to 9th grade and the first participation in any of the elections at the age of 18. However, it should be noted that the aforementioned study subject has not been included in the education content as mandatory teaching material. Mandatory study subjects from Grade 10 to 12 are Latvian language, two foreign languages, mathematics, history of Latvia and the world, chemistry, biology, physics, sports, computer science, literature and music or visual arts.² Specifically, during the high school period emphasis is put on exact science disciplines and languages. At the same time the social and humanitarian science subjects are assigned the status of optional study subjects, namely, the high school students may master at least three of the optional courses, which include economics, philosophy, geographic, psychology, politics and law, home economics, ethics, health studies and cultural studies.³ One of the intermediate conclusions of the study is that the content of secondary education is closely related to the national development priority, postulated by NDP – the “economic advancement”, namely, the students mostly strengthen their knowledge in exact science disciplines and in languages with the purpose of pursuing the relevant studies at higher education level later.

The education expert Aija Kļaviņa revealed in an interview that one of the problems with mastering of social science disciplines at high school level is insufficient number of academic hours, allocated to the social module. Therefore students, who are taught the study subject “Politics and Law”, possibly, are unable to master the knowledge on various issues, related to the civic education, in a complete manner, because the time allocated to the study process is insufficient. The expert suggests combined approach to study content as one of solutions, namely, that the social, humanitarian and exact science subjects would be combined to the extent possible, as a result of which the students would gain a comprehensive view of the socially and nationally significant topics.

Third planning document, related to the education content and civic participation, is the “*Guidelines for National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012-2018*” (GNICSIP). The purpose of this medium-term planning document is strengthening of the national community of Latvia, promotion of democratic values in the Latvian society and creation of an active, educated and inclusive civil society.⁴ GNICSIP Y2012-2018 address three important aspects in terms of civic youth participation. These are – the content, which is mastered during the lessons, the used teaching methods and the interaction between the teacher and the young people; the second element is extra-curricular activities and involvement of young people in these activities, and the third element is the general environment of the school, participation of the school in social events, volunteer work and attitude of the school management towards such activities in general. The objective and priorities stated in the aforementioned planning document comply with the priorities, set by the 2030 SDS regarding the role of the social sciences in the process of creation of active and educated civil society and also correspond to the theoretical aspects of the study and the opinions of the Latvian education experts on the necessity to have the content of the social science studies based on practical examples and physical involvement of the students.

Summarizing of the intermediate results of the study leads to the conclusion that civic participation of the population and civic and critical thinking skills are significant part of the long-term national development vision, emphasizing in particular the role of the social science disciplines in shaping of the aforementioned skills and encouragement of the economic creativity. At the same time it may be concluded that the long-term and medium-term planning documents demonstrate discrepancies of priorities, since the NDP is oriented towards economic advancement of Latvia, which is based on mastering of exact sciences, information technologies and languages, while no focus is paid in this planning document to the contribution of social sciences. The increasing role of the exact sciences and information technologies is reflected by the number of state-funded study places, available in the social science programs in the higher education institutions in Latvia, which has gradually decreased over the last decade, therefore contradicting the contribution of the social sciences to the national economy of Latvia and understanding of the society of democracy and importance of civic participation, emphasized by the Sustainable development strategy. As the emphasis of the exact science disciplines at the higher

¹ Regulations Regarding the State General Secondary Education Standard, Subject Standards and Sample Education programmes: Cabinet Regulations No 281. Politics and Law. Standard of the subject study of general secondary education. 06.06.2013. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 2013/107.2.

² Education Law: Law of the Republic of Latvia. Section four. Mandatory education. 17.11.1998. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 343/344.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Guidelines for National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012-2018: Cabinet Regulations No 542. Civic education. 21.10.2011. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 167 (4565).

education level grows, the importance of the primary and secondary education increases in terms of political participation perspectives and understanding of democracy of the young people. One of the most controversial intermediate conclusions of the study is that the offer of high school education complies with the priorities of the NDP, namely, to have exact science subjects, languages and art subjects as mandatory study subjects, while the social and humanitarian science disciplines shall have the status of optional subjects. Thus, the nine grade education in Latvia should ensure sufficient amount of knowledge and civic skills to allow the person to successfully participate in the public sphere, critically evaluate the political processes, discuss the principles of democracy and participate in the elections, however, the increasingly low electoral activity and low trust to government institutions rather indicate an opposite trend.

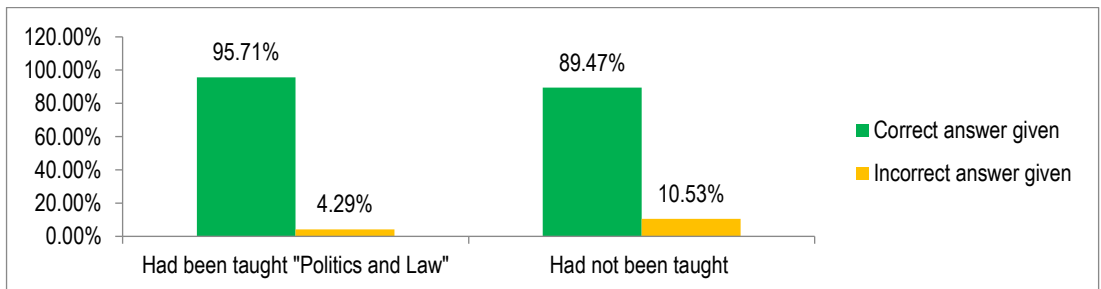
One of the most important problems of general education in Latvia according to the expert interviews is the lack of education monitoring in regard to the quality of the teachers' work, which especially concerns the social science disciplines at high school, considering the fact that both the mastering of the study subjects of the social module and passing of the relevant final examination depends on the initiative and individual interests of each student.

Survey results and expert view

12th grade students were questioned within the framework of the study to determine the knowledge of the young people on the state, politics, understanding of democracy and social sciences, as well as the perspectives of political participation of the young people. In order to verify the role of the social science disciplines in the knowledge on politics, possessed by the young people, the study compared young people, who had mastered the study subject "Politics and Law" during the high school period, and those, who did not have this study subject in their curriculums. In addition the expert interviews provided an expanded and in-depth view on the state educational policy in the sphere of social sciences in Latvia.

The intermediate results of the study demonstrate that majority of the questioned students have an understanding of the concept of democracy regardless of whether the student had mastered the study subject "Politics and Law" at high school. In total 91.6% of respondents gave a correct explanation of democracy from the offered answers, however, at the same time 8.4% of the respondents noted that democracy is a form of government, in which the power is implemented by the oldest party or that the power is implemented through a small group of selected people. Chart No 2 summarizes the analysis results regarding the respondent answers to the question of what democracy is.

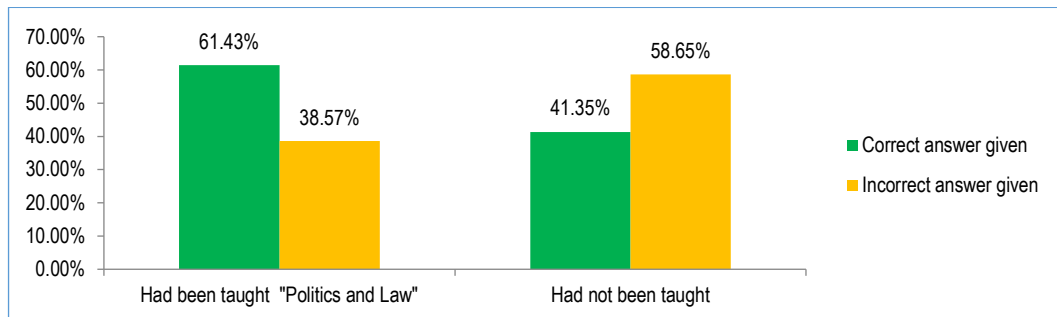
Chart No 2. Summary of students' answers on the explanation of democracy



Source: Chart created by the author, using the results of the questionnaire "Role of social sciences in functioning of a critically thinking society".

The results displayed in the chart confirm that the students, who had been taught the mentioned subject at school, show slightly better knowledge of explanation of democracy than the young people who had not been taught this subject. While the young people demonstrated rather good knowledge of the concept of democracy in its general context, the understanding of specific elements, characterizing democracy, is much poorer. The students were asked in the questionnaire to name the branches of power in a democratic state. 48.3% of the respondents responded correctly by indicating that branches of democracy are legislative power, executive power and judicial power. 20.2% of the respondents replied that the branches of power in democracy are constituted by Saeima, executive power and judicial power, which is not an entirely wrong answer under the context of Latvia, but is not exactly an accurate formulation of the answer.

Chart No 3. Answers of students to the question regarding the braches of democratic government and mastering of study subject „Politics and Law” at school

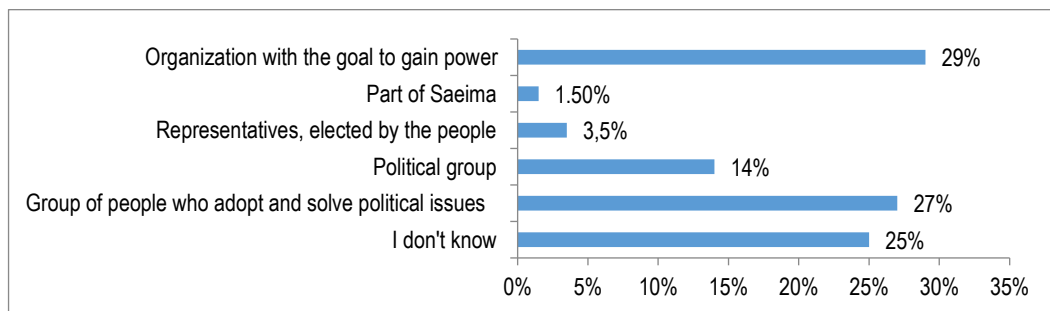


Source: Chart created by the author, using the results of the questionnaire "Role of social sciences in functioning of a critically thinking society".

Education expert Aija Kļaviņa believes that one of the problems is caused by the lack of good materials for mastering of social sciences at high school. She states that current materials are outdated and should be updated on regular basis, since the content of the social sciences constantly changes in response to global events. That way theoretical knowledge, too, would be more related to actual social-economic and political events.

The first results obtained from the study show that in some issues there is a distinct discrepancy between the actual knowledge of the young people on various politics-related issues, and the objectives, set by the national education programs. For example, the Regulations Regarding the State Standard in Basic Education, the Subjects of Study Standards in Basic Education and Model Basic Educational Programmes stipulate that students upon graduating from the 12th grade shall understand and be able to describe main principles of functioning of a political party, however the obtained survey results indicate otherwise (see Chart No 4).¹

Chart No 4. Explanation of the political party by the respondents



Source: Chart created by the author, using the results of the questionnaire "Role of social sciences in functioning of a critically thinking society".

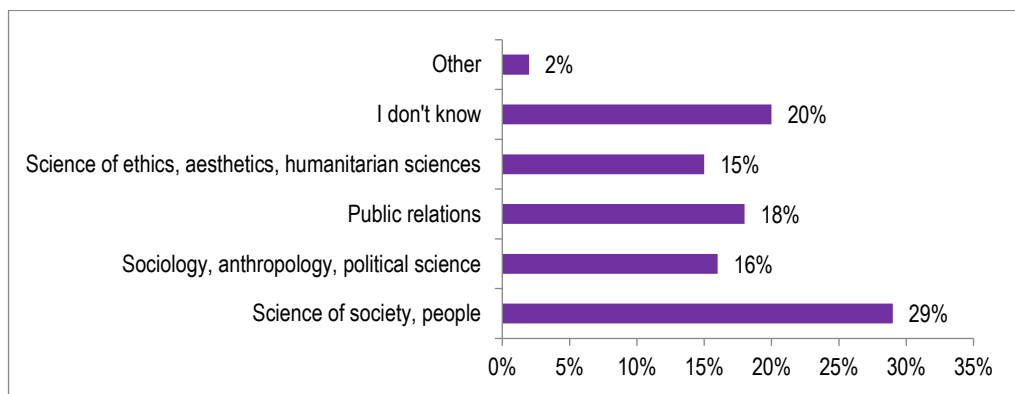
In total 29% of the questioned 12th grade students explained the essence of a political party as an organization with the goal to gain power, while every fourth student was unable to give a description of a political party. 27% of the respondents linked political party to the activity of Saeima deputies and fractions, namely, the party adopts and solves political issues within the framework of legislative power.

¹ Cabinet Regulations No 281. Politics and Law. Standard of the subject study of general secondary education. 06.06.2013. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*. No 2013/107.2.

Extracts from the answers of the respondents indicate that already during the school period young people have developed negative attitude towards political parties, namely, in some cases the parties are perceived as criminal organizations, which try to steal from the state and its people. Attitude towards political parties has a fundamentally important role in the civic participation of the people and the attitude towards the state in general. Negative feeling towards the parties diminishes the wish of the people to get involved in the parties and also weakens the electoral activity. The negative attitude of the young people towards the political parties can be explained by the negative feeling towards political parties, prominent in the society in general, namely, this aspect reveals the influence of both family and mass media on the understanding and opinions of the young people on the activity of political parties.

In order to understand whether the young people are aware of the importance of social sciences and their relation to democracy and understanding of the role of active and educated citizens, they were given the task to describe social sciences. The answers of the respondents were divided into several categories, which have been summarized in Chart No 5.

Chart No 5. Answers of the students on what social sciences are



Source: Chart created by the author, using the results of the questionnaire “Role of social sciences in functioning of a critically thinking society”.

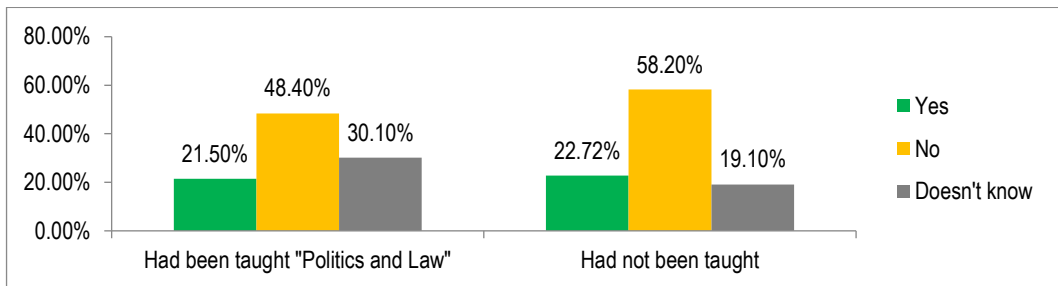
The obtained intermediate results reveal that social sciences are mostly linked to the study of society and people, 16% of the respondents have linked social sciences to certain disciplines of science (sociology, anthropology and political science), while 18% have linked the social sciences with public relations. Both the quantitative results and the extracts of some answers lead to the conclusion that only around 45% of young people demonstrate at least minimal understanding of the social sciences. It shows that the importance of social sciences, which is emphasized in 2030 SDS of Latvia, is not reflected in the actual knowledge and elementary understanding of the young people regarding contribution of these sciences to the democracy, civil society and national economy in general.

The available data show that only 1% of the total population of Latvia are involved in political parties, which is the poorest indicator among the member states of the European Union (EU).¹ For comparison 4.3% of the population in Estonia are involved in political parties, 4.1% in Lithuania, while the average indicator in the EU is 4.7%.² It should be noted that the first intermediate results of the study indicate that the students, who had been taught the study subject “Politics and Law” at school, do not demonstrate higher potential involvement in the activity of political parties (see Chart No 6).

¹ Karlsonē. Līva. In Latvia, the least people in Europe are involved in political parties. 12.08.2017. *Latvijas Sabiedriskie mediji*. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/latvija-vismazak-iedzivotaju-eiropa-iesaistas-politiskajas-partijas.a246474/>

² Klūga, Māris. In Latvian political parties, least people involved than in Estonia and Lithuania. Why is it? 02.02.2018. *Latvijas Sabiedriskie mediji*. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/latvija-partijas-daudzkart-mazak-biedru-neka-lietuva-un-igauņija.-kapecta.a262825/>

Chart No 6. Potential involvement of young people in political parties and mastering of the study subject „ Politics and Law” at school



Source: Chart created by the author, using the results of the questionnaire "Role of social sciences in functioning of a critically thinking society".

The results, summarized in the chart, reveal that the young people, who had been taught the study subject "Politics and Law" at school, do not show higher potential involvement in political parties as the respondents, who had not been taught this subject at school. The revealed phenomenon can be viewed and explained from several perspectives.

Senior officer of the National Centre for Education Sandra Falka emphasizes that democracy and civic duties have been integrated in several study subjects both at primary school and high school, therefore viewing the democratic values from different perspectives. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Regulations Regarding the State Standard in Basic Education, the Subjects of Study Standards in Basic Education and Model Basic Educational Programmes stipulate that the student, having mastered this subject, shall gain understanding of the functioning of political parties and shall also acquire necessary knowledge and skills for practical political participation, the obtained study results do not show differences in perspectives of political participation between the students, who have mastered the study subject "Politics and Law", and those who haven't.

Participation in elections is the result of civic education and confirmation of the fact that the young person is aware of his or her duty in the democratic state to participate in making of political choices. In-depth study of the perspectives of political participation of young people is important, if only from the point of view of electoral activity performance, where gradual decline of participation is observed both in Saeima and European Parliament elections (see Chart No 8 and Chart No 9 in annex).

Vice-Rector of Riga Stradiņš University professor Tatjana Koķe stated in the interview that schools have vast opportunities and teachers also have been given rather great freedom in creation of the practical content, for example, by meeting representatives of municipal and governmental institutions, journalists and getting involved in the activities of non-governmental organizations or municipalities, where there might be some practice programs for young people introduced.

Conclusions

Previous intermediate results of the study allow drawing conclusion on the existing contradictions in the list of the national development priorities, stated in the 2030 SDS and the NDP. In the long-term planning document the role of social sciences has been emphasized both in terms of civic participation and improvement of critical thinking abilities of the people and promotion of creativity. Respectively, mastering of social sciences is an important precondition to both strengthening of democracy and development of national economy and international competitiveness. Whereas the NDP puts more emphasis on the mastering of exact sciences and information technologies, which would ensure economic advancement of Latvia, while social sciences have been assigned a secondary role. The real situation in both high school period and the higher education is closer to the NDP priorities than the development directions, included in the 2030 SDS, since exact science disciplines, languages and also art have been defined as mandatory study subjects at high school, while social and humanitarian science disciplines have been assigned the status of optional subjects. At the level of higher education the number of state-funded study places has been gradually reduced for social sciences over the last decade, which increases the importance of civic knowledge and skills, mastered at the primary and high school period. Pursuant to the Education Law only primary education is mandatory in Latvia, while acquiring of secondary education depends on the

student and the parents. It only reinforces the role of social sciences at the primary school level, namely, the civic participation knowledge and skills, acquired during the nine years' time have to be sufficient to enable the person to actively participate in the public sphere. Therefore the education policy, implemented by the state, is not consistent in regard to the priorities and development directions, stated in the SDS, where social sciences are mentioned as one of the preconditions of civic participation and development of national economy. The opinions of the experts, interviewed within the framework of the study, allow concluding that the biggest problem in teaching of social science subjects is the lack of teacher monitoring, namely, at the moment it is not possible to determine, what proportions of the content of social science studies are constituted by theory and practice.

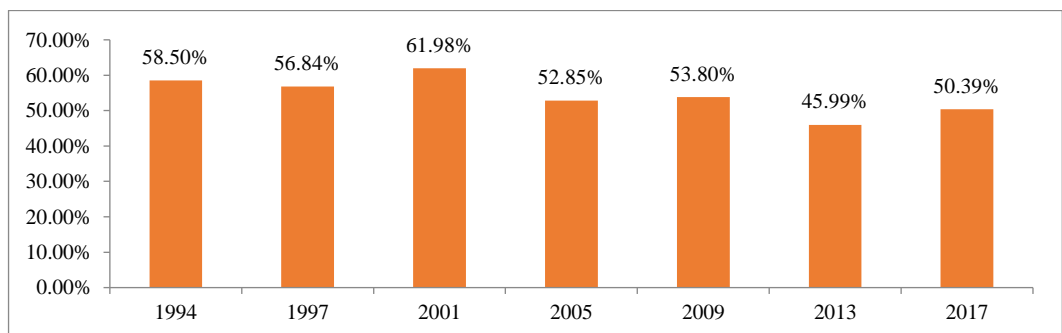
The survey results allow drawing the conclusion on both the knowledge of the young people on national and political issues and on the perspectives of their political participation. In general the young people have understanding of what democracy is in the broadest sense of this concept. No significant differences have been observed between the young people, who have mastered the study subject "Politics and Law", and those, who had not mastered this subject at school. Nevertheless, the differences in the level of knowledge are manifested by more specific questions, related to the description of democracy, for example, the young people, who have mastered the study subject "Politics and Law", are better at explaining of branches of democracy, compared to those, who had not mastered this subject. Respectively, within the framework of theoretical knowledge there is a positive link between the knowledge of the young people and the fact of whether the students have mastered the study subject "Politics and Law".

The study results clearly demonstrate that e young people, who have mastered the study subject "Politics and Law", do not show higher political participation perspectives than those, who had not mastered politics at school. There are no significant percentage differences in potential electoral activity and political party involvement between the students, who have mastered politics at school, and those who had not. This means that the objective of the study subject "Politics and Law", specified in the state education standards, has been achieved only partially, as the young people have been given provided with theoretical knowledge in general, but the practical political participation performance is the same as for the young people, who had not mastered this study subject. Therefore, judging from the perspective of political participation of the students, the state education policy in the sphere of social sciences fails to encourage participation of young people in political processes. This finding contradicts the theoretical assumptions, presented in the study, which specify that mastering of social sciences at school not only provides theoretical knowledge but also gives an impulse to real political involvement, which include participation in parties and non-governmental organizations, participation in elections, involvement in public discussions and other forms of participation.

The education experts, interviewed during the study, explain that the aforementioned finding can be related to the linkage of theory and practice within the framework of the study subjects, preparedness and involvement of teachers, as well as the interaction of parents, teachers and the school in regard to the development of civic knowledge and skills of the young people.

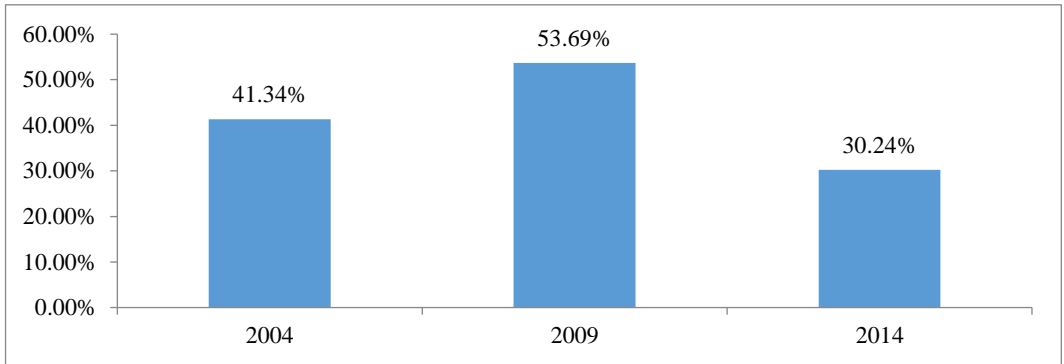
ANNEXES

Chart No 8. Proportion of persons who have voted in municipal elections



Source: Chart created by the author, using the information, available on the website of the Central Election Commission.

Chart No 9. Proportion of persons who have voted in European Parliament elections



Source: Chart created by the author, using the information, available on the website of the Central Election Commission.