

## YOUTH REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY IN LATVIA

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**Abstract.** Development of the society is one of the core issues in sociology. Macro and micro perspectives are used in order to explain social development and social changes in societies. The youth is seen as a significant potential driver of social changes. The study of youth's reflections of existing social order permits to predicting issues and directions of development of the society. The aim of the theses is to find out what the main perceptions and reflections of youth are concerning current situation in Latvia in terms of the development of society. Qualitative approach was used, e.g. summative content analysis method of qualitative content analysis. Results of the research show that young people can identify main characteristics of Latvian society; they see the main points of necessary changes but they are not viewed as significant drivers of changes on macro level of the society.

**Key words:** social development, social structure, social changes, youth.

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### Introduction

Development of society is one of the core issues in sociology. Different approaches of defining and estimating of social development are observed. Theoretical statements on the development of society include directions (also paths, stages) of development of society as well as driving forces that initiate and promote the development of society. There are different keywords in theoretical literature that address the development of society – social differentiation and social integration, social order and social development, modernisation and transformation as well as social innovations (Howaldt J., Kopp R., Schwarz M., 2015).

American sociologist Gerhard Lenski reveals the the development of society in the macro-sociological perspective and describes society as an imperfect system where not all of the parts function to strengthen the whole system. Many patterns and behaviours contribute nothing to the general welfare of the society, but rather serve the interests and needs of individuals or constituent groups. However, it is a sociocultural system, and as such it must have sufficient cooperation among the members of the society so that the system can maintain itself (Lenski G., Nolan P., 2009).

Thus, Gerhard Lenski represents a structuralist view to the social development, considering society as a whole and stressing massive movements and changes of it. As

German sociologists write, "social change in the sense of fundamental transformations at macro level, which sweep over us as mega-trends, or as a sequence of phases separated by (epochal) upheavals, belongs to the field of sociological diagnosis of the times" (Howaldt J., Kopp R., Schwarz M., 2015). From this perspective individuals are rather passive receivers of social changes that are involved in current economic, political, social and cultural processes of society and trying to adapt to them.

Macro-processes in the society are characterised by such terms as postmodern society (Jencks C., 2011), risk society (Zinn, J.O., 2008) and recently with rebirth of radicalism and populism movements (Muranyi I., 2015). Also, the term "post-truth" appears in order to describe society nowadays: "Post-truthfulness builds a fragile social edifice based on wariness. It erodes the foundation of trust that underlies any healthy civilization. When enough of us peddle fantasy as fact, society loses its grounding in reality" (Keyes R., 2004).

As mentioned above, individuals are under the pressure of the developmental stages of society but they are also able to influence changes in social structures to some extent, especially in the circumstances the circumstances of widespreading flows of globalization and mutual interconnectedness. In terms of the paper, authors emphasise the crucial role of individual

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responsibility and power to force changes in social structures and functions.

According to micro-sociological social development theories, human beings are both the source and the primary motive force for development. This means that society progresses only by developing and bringing into expression the higher potentialities of its members; therefore the extent of people's education, the intensity of their aspirations and, the quality of their attitudes, beliefs, ideas, values, skills and information are crucial in each developmental process according to the environmental conditions available (Striano M., 2010). Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner confirms this idea in his theory of social renewal: "The only way to renewal, to a really healthy economy and healthy system of justice, is to create free space for the good impulses and aspirations living in humans to come to the surface" (Steiner R., 2000). Social development implies a qualitative vertical movement to a higher level of performance from whatever level of organization the society has reached in a particular field. This means that each developmental action or practice is aimed at promoting significant performances characterized by an effective and aware use of human potential. Social development implies also a qualitative change in the way society carries out its activities, such as through more progressive and more reflective attitudes and behaviour by the population, the adoption of more democratic and participative social forms of organization, the use of more advanced technology, and the dissemination and circulation of more advanced forms of knowledge (Striano M., 2010).

In the context of interaction between individual and collective responsibility for social development, the role of young people is crucial. They are seen as people with naturally existing innovative potential and power to drive social changes that is especially important when any society faces historical challenges connected with deep and thorough reforms (Youth in

Transition..., 2015). The youth is a very good starting point for observing what is happening in the whole society. It is a lens, which brings into focus gives focus to various problems and system tensions. It also serves as a barometer of social changes and moods. The situation of the youth, their world perception, aspirations and ambitions for life reflect the changes, which have occurred, and the distance, which is still left to be, covered (Szafraniec K., 2011).

Considering all above mentioned and being a part of an international project "Youth in Transition Countries: Innovative Potential, New Context, New Challenges and New Problems" (2014-2016) researchers of Latvia state the aim of the theses as the following: as finding out what the main perceptions and reflections of youth are concerning current situation in Latvia in terms of the development of society. Tasks are related to describing theoretical aspects of social development and analysing of empirical information. It is considered as a relative innovation to explore youth's perception of society as a whole and not in particular details. The following research questions were highlighted with both macro and micro perspective: 1) How do young people estimate the current situation in Latvia? What are the main problems of society? What aspects of Latvian society (as a system) do they estimate as positive and negative? 2) What aspects of the existing order in society would young people want to be changed? 3) What things young people are ready to do by themselves in order to bring changes in society.

Sketching out eventual results of the research, it is worth to mention the main trends from international and national researches. Thus, the results of MYPLACE project show that in Latvia the proportion of politically alienated (young people – auth.) is the highest in Europe (39.2 %), while the emancipatory activist, the traditional and the populist anti-democrat is far below average. In a certain sense, this

constellation expresses defeatist indifference. Those young people who can afford it, resolve it into "civic privatism", the others relate to the public issues helplessly (Muranyi I., 2015). National research about the different aspects of participation of youth reveals similar results. Thus, only 11 % of young people (13-25 years old – auth.) take part in any youth organizations, 79 % of young people do not feel able to influence events in the world; only 10 % seem to be powerful enough to influence anything in Latvia (Par Jaunatnes politikas..., 2016).

In order to find answers to research questions, qualitative social research approach was used. The research was carried out at the Latvia University of Agriculture in 2015-2016. 173 full-time and part-time undergraduate students (who studying economics, sociology, IT) were asked to write essays during certain study courses giving their reflections on the processes and phenomena seen in Latvian society according to above mentioned research questions. Summative content analysis approach (Hsieh H.F., Shannon S.E., 2005) or supplementary counting (Hannah D.R., Lautsch B.A, 2011) were used in order to explore usage of typical answers, to identify patterns and to interpret the context that is beyond mere word counts to include latent content analysis. This approach gives opportunity to get a more precise picture of the situation and develops new insights into the phenomenon of interest.

Empirical analysis of the information was based on the following aspects:

- 1) macro vs micro levels – the processes and phenomena of which level are marked by youth as topical for Latvian society;
- 2) individual vs collective accountability – the level on which, according to the youth, the identified problems must be addressed.

## **Research results and discussion**

### **1. Positive and negative aspects of Latvian society**

Using the summative method of content analysis, the authors sum up youth's positive and negative assessments into tables (tables 1 and 2). The number of assessments (n=) is summed up by grouping the most typical answers (or assessments) into thematic blocks and categorizing them on the micro and macro levels.

Analysing the assessments expressed in the essays about the Latvian society as a whole, we note a trend that young people express more negative assessment (n=555) than positive (227) on both micro and macro levels.

The compiled results show that young people see and appreciate certain positive aspects pertaining to the social structure and processes in it, e.g. the importance of culture and education as social institutions; patriotism and unity on the issues of public interest; an interest in global issues and their impact; the realization that generational change causes transformation of society. Particular emphasis can be placed on the different manifestations of national identity in Latvian society (Song and Dance Festival; clothing with Latvian symbols and characters; Latvian holiday traditions; sport games and sports fan movement etc.), the unity of society during "difficult times", growing patriotism that can be seen as factor that unifies different groups and categories in society. Analysing the thematic blocks of negative assessments, we must point out the signs of social inequality in society. The most significant one is economic inequality that is linked to sex, age, and regional disparities. The young people view prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination as negative features of Latvian society, as well as subsequent fragmentation of society, particularly highlighting ethnic and religious aspects. It points both to the specifics of Latvian political and social environment and to the reflection of global processes on the society. The young people express their desire to see

more rapid economic, political, social changes and criticize different structures on the macro level. It can be concluded that mentally they are ready for a different stage of the development of society, but on a macro level this transition has not yet occurred: *"I wish society to move to a different level of existence", "I want to live in a healthier society", "the common public opinion must be changed", "society must be more productive"*.

Evaluating particular positive initiatives that pertain to the micro level, young people emphasize the individual freedom of action and thought, as well as different initiatives where they engage in volunteer work and help fellow human beings by donating money to charity, donating blood, engaging in the search for missing people, finding like-minded people on social networks to help the needy. Such highly specific and affirmative actions promote mutual respect and tolerance towards diversity. Young people value a variety of new initiatives, business forms and the creation of economic activities, for example, the use of ancient Latvian symbols in daily production of goods, craftsmanship,

production of home compounds, ecological products, other local products and services thereby showing their preference for local resources.

The most significant thematic block of negative assessments on the micro level is linked to the safety and well-being of children. Cruelty and aggression among children, bad relationship with parents and addiction to technologies are the risks that can deepen the social fragmentation in the future.

Young people see others around them as negative-minded, frustrated, and gloomy, as the "grey mass" that demonstrates indifference and intolerance towards others. Such individuals are passive; they do not want to act in order to initiate changes in society, and young people see this attitude as an obstacle to the development of society.

The youth emphasizes the dominance of individual and material values over moral and ethical principles and the lack of respect and tolerance: *"In Latvia, people like to show off their superiority, especially in the financial area; you really can't see it abroad on the same scale"*.

Table 1

**Youth's assessment of Latvian society at the macro level**

Positive	Negative
National identity (culture, traditions and sports) (n=59) Public unity, cohesion (n=46) Youth is more tolerant towards other ethnicities and cultures (n=19) Significance of education (n=18) Change of generation causes transformations in society (n=16) Rise of interest in global problems (n=9) Demographic issues (number of children in families, support for families with children etc.) (n=7)	Social inequality (economic, gender, age, ethnic, religious, regional) and social exclusion (n=115) Prejudices, stereotypes, discrimination (age, gender, people with special needs, ethnic) (n=74) Fragmentation of society (relationships between ethnic groups, economic) (n=53) Necessity of systemic transformations (tax system, health care, benefits etc.) (n=40) The influence of media, especially social networks on the formation of public opinion (n=24) Security and military threats, refugee issues, terrorism (n=17) Various forms of deviance (crime, addictions, pedophilia, drugs, accidents) (n=15)

**Source: authors' calculations based on the research results**

**Youth's assessment of Latvian society at the micro level**

Positive	Negative
Voluntary work and helping fellow human beings (n=16) New micro-level economic forms (home compounders, crafts and workshops, ecological and natural products) (n=16) Individual freedom in thought and actions, a chance to reach one's goals (n=14) Family values (n=7)	Concerns about children's safety and welfare (cruelty and aggression among children, relationships with parents, dependence on technology, security) (n=49) Negativity and unhappiness, gloominess (n=34) Money as a value, search for work and better life abroad (n=31) Indifference to others, unwillingness to help, individualism, selfishness (n=30) Principles of respect, tolerance, moral and ethics; people feel unappreciated (n=29) People are not ready to act and initiate changes (n=25) Formation of relationships, their volatility, unwillingness to solve problems (n=12) Unwillingness to learn Latvian (n=7)

**Source: authors' calculations based on the research results**

Micro- and macro-level analysis shows that young people's assessments of the society include relatively few positive areas (culture, helping fellow human beings, strengthening of national identity, patriotism) where it operates and feels emotionally "together", as opposed to inequality, which deepens social stratification and divisions in society, integration and ethnic problems, the threat posed by globalization.

**2. Aspects that would be changed**

The second research question addressed issues that young people would like to change in society. The types of changes vary greatly; they cover both the macro and micro levels, affecting both individuals and society as a whole. The wording of the desired changes is both specific and very general. Macro-level changes are associated with recent current events in the world – war performance, safety, increasing migration. According to these, there are statements about the need to ensure world peace and the desire "to not involve civilians in the solution of political conflicts". Respondents also accentuate the necessary transformations on the national level in both economic and social areas, such as "solutions to tackling the country's economic development and growth, creation of favourable environment for business, reducing unemployment, helping the needy" etc., that have not presented enough positive solutions for a long time. A part of the desired changes concerns the politicians and government: "I wish

*the government would listen to the people", "to hear them".*

One of the changes that young people desire to see in society the most is the reducing of public fragmentation, which includes several aspects. First, stratification of society by income. Young people mention the following changes: "reducing of stratification to avoid evaluation by the material resources; for children not to be offended by not having the most stylish clothes, the newest mobile phones or lots of money; equality in educational establishments for children not to be divided by their parents' financial status and for children not to split in groups according to their parents' economic status; discrimination because of the social status". Public stratification by income is connected to the change of values in society; young people point out the need to emphasize spiritual values versus material values "so that the humanity would prevail over the material", "so that we would think less about the money", "so that people would understand that money or expensive things are not the most important thing". Second, the changes need to take place in the areas related to race, ethnicity and language. The third aspect that divides society is religion. Young people highlight this aspect in connection with the growing immigration in Europe and Latvia, the entry of Muslims in our society, and the lack of tolerance in society towards those members of the public that are different in some way. Disagreements between different religions

puts a young person to make the following conclusion: *"The situation in the world shows that religion kills; people would live much better without religion; they would not have to worry about whose beliefs are more correct or who is the bad guy"*. Also, young people believe that the attitude of the public towards those that are different can be changed by socialization, as children take over behaviour patterns and opinions of their parents.

One of the most significant group of desired changes are the changes related to the moral and ethical values, the transformation of people's attitudes and behaviour linked to individual accountability and not the responsibility of a state, an organization or government. Young people mention things like reducing of passivity, negativity and intolerance as one of the necessary steps towards public unity and solidarity. Society needs to be more united, just like *"politicians need to unite in order to pursue common goals"* – the youth sees divisions not only among the members of society in general, but also among politicians.

Young people desire to see changes in the aspects that are linked to reduction of social inequality (n=87), change of attitude on the individual and institutional levels (n=75), reducing of indifference and passivity (n=69), security and peace in the world (n=51). Youth's expectations are formulated both in general and in particular way with the emphasis on the individual's potential to contribute to this change, highlighting the need to change one's personal attitude, position, behaviour at the micro level.

### **3. Individual readiness to implement changes in society**

Young people's readiness to change society is the final research question. Proportionally, significantly less definite answers were given to this question than to the questions about what young people do not like in society and what they would like to change. It can be explained by the fact that it is a lot harder to suggest concrete

actions and understand one's responsibility before the society than to point out the negatives and the desirable changes. 16 young people were unable to give any concrete, even theoretical answer to this question. To a comparatively lesser extent, young people see themselves as active agents of changes in the society in the future. Answers to this question were rather general and not specific. Many of respondents acknowledged that changes must start at an individual level, with person's attitude, actions, behaviour; they pointed out that the most important thing is *"my own actions and attitude and that of others; what kind of society we want to be a part of"* (n=129). Another point is the significance of family values (n=62), especially accentuating the importance of the cultivation of spiritual values in the family. It corresponds to the effort to balance spiritual and material values opposing the values that dominate in consumer society. Practical involvement in the transformation of society is often linked to the raising of future generations: *"raising my children I will install into them an understanding that it is important to contribute to the society"*, *"I will teach my child what is money, power, love and respect"*. Young people mention the following actions as important: *"being responsible, being you, resisting peer pressure, acting ethically, promoting integration, discouraging aggression and fighting for justice"*. Specific actions were more often linked to voluntary work, getting involved in charity work, helping victims of different disasters, protection of nature, caring for the loved ones, avoiding the use of technology to have more time for family and friends. Only a small part of the youth expressed willingness to join some organization or participate in its founding (n=21) and political activities (n=9). A few young people did not believe that anything must change, *"because every person must understand these things"* or felt that they would not be able to change anything in society.

### Conclusions and suggestions

- 1) In their assessments of the positive and negative aspects, young people accentuate the negative, which can be linked to the processes of social differentiation in Latvian society, especially emphasizing inequality and social exclusion evident in the society. Positive assessment is related to culture and national identity at the macro level, and individual choice and freedom of action is emphasized at the micro level, which leads to the conclusion that young people have opportunities to initiate changes in society.
- 2) In theory, young people are aware of what changes are needed in society, are able to identify them, but there is a wide gap between

their expectations and willingness to bring about any real changes.

- 3) The study results confirm the thesis included in the introduction that Latvian society is passive. Young people see themselves as capable agents of change at the micro level, but the same results do not indicate the readiness of young people to engage in initiation of changes in the macro-level structures.

The research results confirm that young people see the need for the various transformations of Latvian society, but at the moment it is difficult to identify potential drivers of change

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