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Political Activity of the Young Generation of Georgians in 2011–2019

Preliminary Remarks

Young Georgians are currently facing many challenges related to socio-political and cultural life, one of which is the democratization of the state and the overlapping globalization and westernization. Democratization requires building a civil society as one of the fundamental standards of democracy. For its proper functioning, modern democracy needs civil society, and therefore an empowered society, conscious individuals who are active in the social sphere. A lack of this component causes many problems, such as low turnout in elections and referendum procedures, which weakens the authority's legitimacy and causes difficulties with implementing political decisions.

Nevertheless, in Georgia, it has not yet been possible to build a fully participatory and inclusive civil society like in the West. Democratization requires the involvement of society, particularly the young generation, which soon will constitute the new elite in the process of transforming the state at the socio-political level.

This paper is a study based on the secondary data generated by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) – a network of research, resource, and training centers established in 2003 in the South Caucasus states. We have compiled these studies by year, analyzing only young people aged 18–35 as people representing the young generation of Georgians. This work is impor-

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tant for several reasons. First, studying the youth's political activity is relevant to understanding young people's opinions on democracy and democratization. Second, it is precisely political activity that is one of the elements of building a civil society as the foundation of democracy. An analysis of young people's political activity shows in which phase the democratization in Georgia is now. Third, the paper contributes to further research on the involvement of young people in socio-political life.

Three main research methods have been used in the study – the desk research method, comparison, and the statistical method based on secondary data. Moreover, these methods have been supported by the method of qualitative analysis with the technique of expert interview with professors from the Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. The interviews are primary sources, and they were conducted via the Internet. The desk research method has been used to determine the essence of political activity and analyze data on the argumentation of the indicated results. On the other hand, the statistical method is the core of the work because it has been used to analyze the results of the CRRC research. The results have been extracted from the CRRC database – the Online Data Analysis tool. The comparison has helped to analyze the statistical results over the years.

The levels of political activity are difficult to define, depending on the adopted definition of democracy and democratization – and this involves more comprehensive studies on the theoretical framework of political behavior. Yet, in the paper, we have assumed the definition of the ideal democracy of R. Dahl (1989), who expressed five criteria (effective participation, voting equality at the decisive stage, enlightenment, understanding, control of the agenda, inclusiveness) that illustrate the principles of citizen participation in politics in the following forms extended by J. Garlicki and A. Noga-Bogomilski: participation in elections (active voting rights), participation in government (passive election right), participation in an open and public political debate, participation in the creation, search and evaluation of sources of information on politics, participation in the creation and participation in interest groups, and social movements³. In the case of the existing data, we have divided the paper into three parts: interest in politics, participation in voting, and participation in public meetings, protests, and social movements.

As in the case of the political activity of the young generation of Georgians, we have assumed that the negative attitudes of young people toward social and political life can be attributed to political processes that do not take into account

³ J. Garlicki, A. Noga-Bogomilski, *Kultura polityczna w społeczeństwie demokratycznym*, Warsaw 2014.

the interests of young people. They are also more critical of the existing political elite. The young generation of Georgians in the socio-political reality will have to deal with problems concerning themselves in the nearest future. Moreover, the activity of young Georgians focuses mainly on protests because this type of political behavior is based on emotions and on the tendency to fight against the system. It is worth noting that young Georgians claim that voting and other types of participation are essential to be a “good” citizen. However, they are not as active as older generations, especially when it comes to voting.

There are research limitations in the article, namely time constraints. Due to the availability of research, we have chosen the analysis from 2011 to 2019. So, as indicated above, this analysis is a contribution to further research. Moreover, the paper is part of a series of papers on the opinion of the young generation of Georgians about democracy and democratization.

Interest in Politics

Public engagement starts with knowledge and interest in politics. According to the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) data, every year, fewer and fewer young people are interested in politics. Therefore, they talk less and less about socio-political life. According to a 2011 MYPLACE survey, only 34% of young respondents in Kutaisi and 41% in Telavi emphasized that they were interested in politics. The young people interviewed in two Georgian cities were interested in Georgia’s domestic political issues – issues related to their city where they currently live and problems related to their current neighborhood. According to these studies, young people were not interested in European issues⁴.

In turn, according to a 2015 poll by the CRRC, only about a third of young people know the exact number of MPs. The situation is similar for the knowledge of the person elected as the primary candidate for parliament from their region. It means that a significant part of the younger generation was not interested in the lawmaking process⁵. It may be due to political nihilism among young people. Research shows that politics was considered “civil dirty work”⁶.

Moreover, the CRRC research from 2017 shows that almost half, 45% of respondents do not talk about socio-political aspects at all (Figure 1). However,

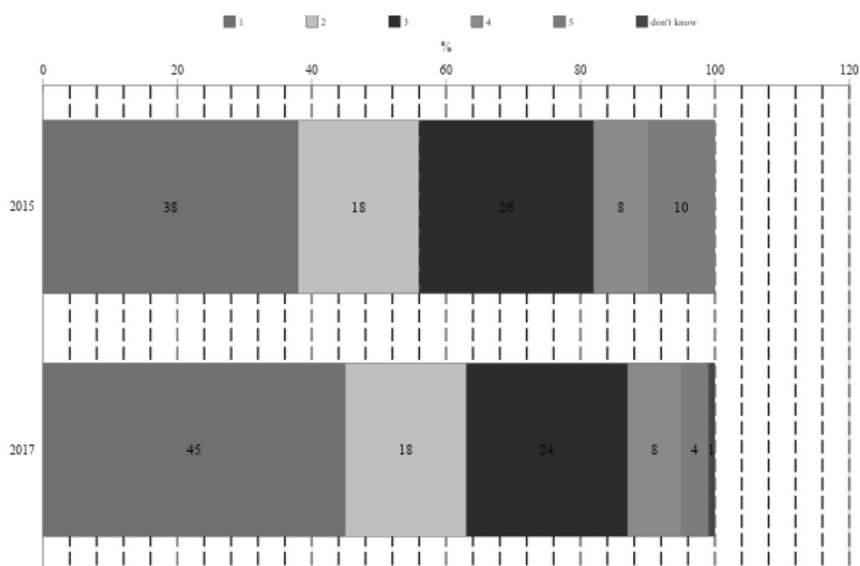
⁴ MYPLACE Report 2011, https://www.fp7-myplace.eu/documents/d2/Georgia_D2.3.pdf [access: 5.03.2020].

⁵ Caucasus Barometer, <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org> [access: 5.03.2020].

⁶ MYPLACE Report 2011, https://www.fp7-myplace.eu/documents/d2/Georgia_D2.3.pdf [access: 5.03.2020].

the number of young people speaking about politics remains constant, sometimes to a limited extent. The respondents most often declare a shallow level of interest in politics. Moreover, many young Georgians do not even know the members of parliament in their constituency. According to T. Zurabashvili's research: "The CRRC/NDI pre-electoral poll in June 2017 asked questions about an important ongoing political issue, namely, the draft of the Revision of the Constitution adopted by the State Constitutional Commission. The results showed that young Georgians are less aware and less informed about the constitutional amendments than are older citizens"⁷.

Figure 1. "How often do you talk to your friends about politics? Where 1 means never and 5 always", age 18–35, in %



Source: Own study based on Caucasus Barometer data, <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org> [access: 5.03.2020].

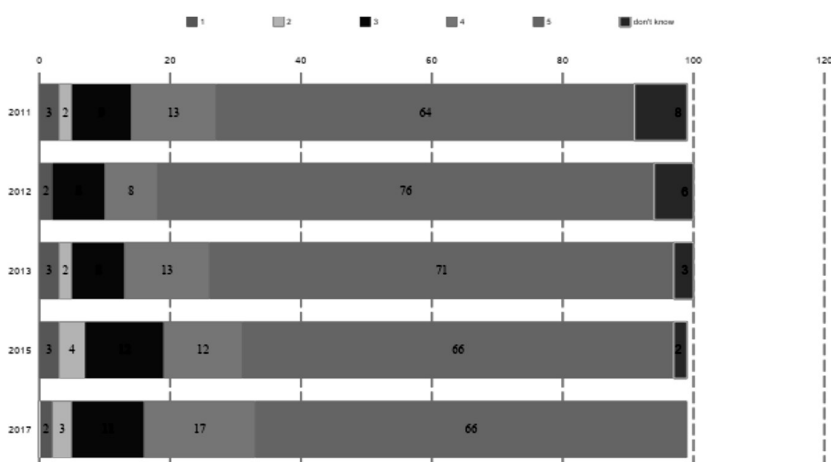
Participation in Voting

One of the main ways to get involved is by participating in new government formations and elections. Knowledge of political platforms, electoral process-

⁷ T. Zurabishvili, *Georgia's 2016 Parliamentary Election: One Year Later*, "Caucasus Analytical Digest" 2017, No. 100.

es, and political parties is essential to making conscious choices. According to polls by the Georgian Institute for Politics in 2016, young people see voting as one of their main ways of influencing politics. Other forms of activity, such as membership of a political party, activity in an NGO, and participation in demonstrations, have relatively low support both among the youth and the entire population of Georgia⁸. According to Figure 2, presenting the answer to the question, or indicating the importance of voting in elections, is essential to “good” citizens, a stable tendency is noticeable from 2011 to 2017 that voting in elections is essential.

Figure 2. “Is voting in elections important for a “good” citizen? Where 1 means not important and 5 very important.” age 18–35, in %



Source: Own study based on Caucasus Barometer data, <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org> [access: 5.03.2020].

Despite a positive declaration of participating in elections, compared to other age groups, the frequency of youth participation in elections is lower. Although the Central Election Commission in Georgia does not publish information on the election regarding age distribution, other studies indicate that the young generation is the most passive voter. According to the CRRC survey, only 63% of young respondents took part in the 2012 elections. For comparison, in the group over 56 years old, it was 83%⁹.

⁸ Caucasus Barometer, op.cit.

⁹ Ibidem.

Youth involvement in the electoral processes has several advantages: first, more young people have comprehensive information about the importance of elections, procedures, and political parties, and second, the state has more rational voters – young people. Moreover, the involvement of the new generation and participation in elections will make their interests visible, as political parties will try to show their interests and problems in the election platforms. CRRC research on the decision-making process shows that only 11% of respondents aged 15–29 in 2013 were involved in making decisions on important issues. Furthermore, the top priority for the younger generation is the labor market, improved healthcare, high-quality education, and good governance. According to the 2013 CRRC survey, the three main problems facing young people are employment, poverty, and access to education¹⁰.

A low level of participation in socio-political life among young people is common not only in Georgia¹¹, and this alienation from public actions such as elections has been a matter of concern in many other countries¹². It is believed that the cause of this phenomenon is, for example, the low participation of young people in society or the preference by this environment for other types of activities to express their political and social views.

Mainstream political parties tend not to be protest-oriented but see youth alienation as an opportunity to win their support¹³. An example of this is the minor political party “New Political Center – Girchi” that created an advertisement during the 2016 election campaign for the parliament in Georgia encouraging young people to participate in the upcoming elections. The ad called on young voters to be the change. Moreover, the commercial emphasized that the political parties were using populist promises to attract the older generations¹⁴.

According to the poll conducted after the November 2016 elections by the CRRC, there is a difference in political behavior between generations of voters in Georgia. Even taking into account the trend toward social expecta-

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ E. Fieldhouse, M. Tranmer, A. Russell, *Something about young people or something about elections? Electoral participation of young people in Europe: Evidence from a multilevel analysis of the European Social Survey*, “European Journal of Political Research” 2007, No. 46 (6), pp. 797–822.

¹² P. Norris, “Young people and political activism: From the politics of loyalties to the politics of choice?” *Speech to Civic Engagement in the 21st Century: Toward a Scholarly and Practical Agenda Conference*, University of South Carolina, October 1–2, 2003.

¹³ G. Lomsadze, *For some Georgians, mooning is a continuation of politics by other means*, “Eurasianet”, 13.11.2018, <https://eurasianet.org/for-some-georgians-mooning-is-a-continuation-of-politics-by-other-means> [access: 6.03.2020].

¹⁴ T. Zurabishvili, op.cit.

tions, both during the parliamentary elections on October 8 and October 30 in 2016. Voters who were between the ages of 18 and 35 were less active than older voters. The pre-election polls of June 2016 and June 2017 also indicated a relatively low level of voting intention compared to older generations. In addition, in June 2017, the pre-election CRRC survey also provided plausible voter model variables to address social bias. However, those young Georgians who planned to vote for a particular party were less confident about their choice (Caucasus Barometer, 2016, 2017)¹⁵.

Moreover, one of the reasons why young Georgians tend to avoid voting was emphasized by T. Zurabashvili, who pointed to the institutional level. He underlined that the Georgian electoral law requires voters to vote in constituencies where they are registered. However, internal migrations lead to a situation in which young Georgians cannot participate in the voting process¹⁶.

Participation in Public Meetings and Protests

Civic activity in Georgia functions mainly in terms of participation in protests and strikes. In Georgia, there are still psychological, social, and political barriers to building a civil society. Civil activism in Georgia has primarily emotional conditions. Understanding civil activism has more to do with the political aspects in Georgia and less with non-political issues. According to G. Nodia, the political activity of young people has been visible, especially since 2000, in business, the media, and civil society. This tendency occurred in the United Nations Movement (2004) when many (probably most) top officials were very young, and the appointment of 20–30-year-olds to top government positions had become a habit¹⁷.

A similar attitude to civic activity is visible in the recent research carried out by the Ebert Foundation in 2017¹⁸. According to its data, a minority of young people do not trust the government (34%) and local government (32%), while the majority of young people (56%) participate in elections. As for student activism, in Georgia, it is mainly reflected in political and social criticism. Examples include anti-government actions with the slogan “the system should be destroyed” (2012), the environmental and social movements “Green Fist” and “Guerrilla

¹⁵ Caucasus Barometer, op.cit.

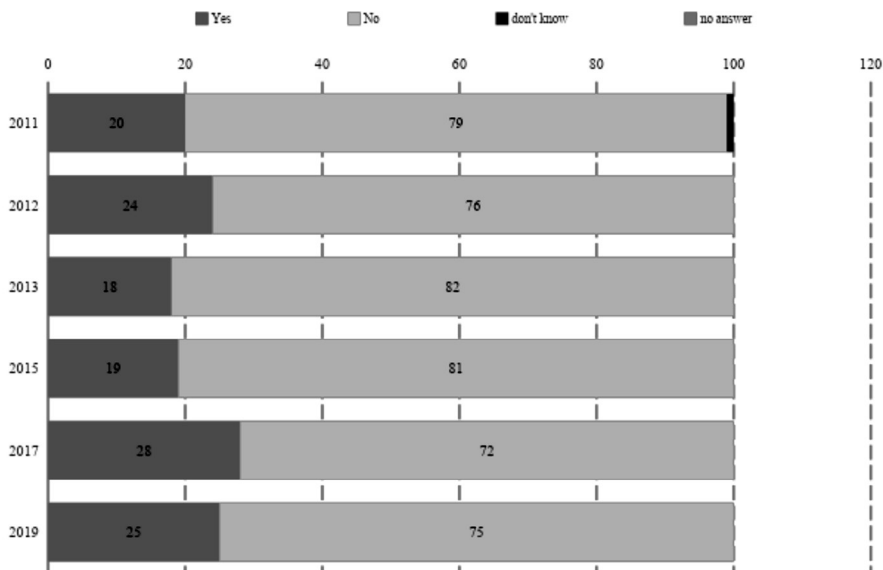
¹⁶ T. Zurabishvili, op.cit.

¹⁷ Interview with G. Nodia, 16 February 2019.

¹⁸ Ebert Foundation, *Generation in Transition: Youth Study 2016 Georgia*, <http://www.fes-caucasus.org/news-list/e/generation-in-transition-youth-study-2016-georgia/> [access: 10.02.2019].

Gardening” that have been actively involved in recent years, and the protection of Vake Park, after the floods of June 13, 2015. Also, in 2016, the Tbilisi State University’s students created the Auditorium 115, which initially focused solely on educational issues but now engages with broader social activism¹⁹.

Figure 3. “Have you participated in public meetings / social activities in the last six months?” Age 18–35 years, in %



Source: Own study based on Caucasus Barometer data, <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org> [access: 5.03.2020].

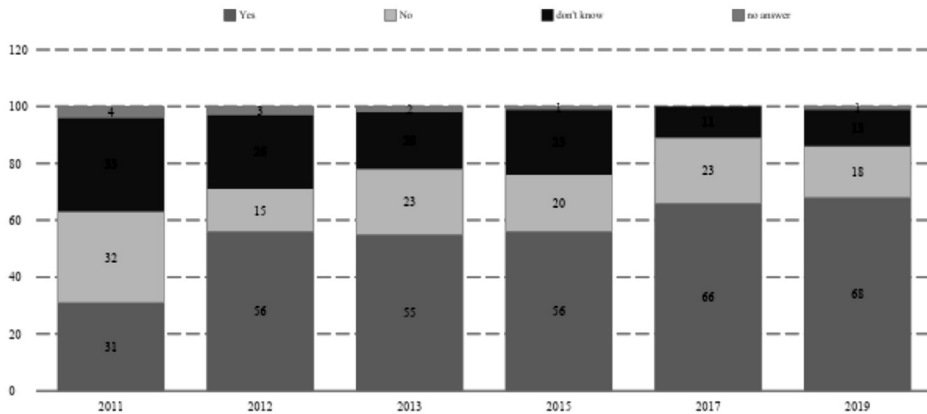
Political behavior also involves participation in public meetings / social activities related to the current socio-political situation. According to the CRRC data from 2011 to 2017 presented in Figure 3, most of the surveyed young people did not participate in such meetings in the last six months, which means that the trend is stable, although negative²⁰. However, the data re-

¹⁹ L. Tsuladze, N. Macharashvili, K. Pachulia, *SOS Tbilisi: Challenges to Environmental Civic Participation in Georgia*, “Problems of Post-Communism” 2017, Vol. 65, No. 5.

²⁰ Despite a stable, though declining, tendency to participate in social meetings and activities, it should be noted that young people are particularly interested in economic issues, namely getting a well-paid job, and are willing to participate in actions supporting these issues. Such an initiative was the project “Spend Your Summer in Georgia”. The action was a response to the suspension of flights by Russian President Vladimir Putin from July 8, 2019. His decision came after days of protests in Tbilisi that began after a Russian MP delivered a speech from the Marshal’s seat in the Georgian parliament.

garding the importance of attending this kind of meetings shows a different trend (Figure 4). Most respondents declare that it is essential to participate in public meetings, and the trend is increasing. According to E. Shaverdashvili, the young generation considers political activity in the context of participation in meetings as a betrayal of their principles²¹.

Figure 4. “People should or should not participate in protest actions?”, age 18–35, in %



Source: Own study based on Caucasus Barometer data, <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org> [access: 5.03.2020].

Participation in Social Movements

G. Nodia believes that many young Georgians are nihilistic about conventional party politics and prefer social movements over political parties. However, these movements are also often weakly structured. Thus, spontaneous mobilization for protest actions is more typical than long-term organized campaigns, although the latter's experience is slightly greater. Their main goal is to protect the environment (ecological movements), women's rights, the fight against corruption at various levels, and a repressive drug policy²². One example of

The initiative aims to attract more tourists to Georgia by publishing information about Georgia's tourism potential. A Facebook group was created where members from all over the world wrote about their good experiences in the country; A. Jones, *Putin Attacks Georgian Tourism, Georgians React with Social Campaign*, „Georgia Today”, 24.06.2019, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/16196/Putin-Attacks-Georgian-Tourism%2C-Georgians-React-with-Social-Campaign> [access: 10.04.2019].

²¹ Interview with E. Shaverdashvili, 19 February 2019.

²² Interview with G. Nodia, 16 February 2019.

protests uniting the above youth movements was the one organized in 2017 around the arrest of the rapper duo “Birja Mafia” for drug possession. The mobilization of thousands of young protesters sparked a new debate about the need to liberalize the country’s drug policy. These were groups such as: “Green Fist” (მწვანე მუშტი)²³, “White Noise Movement” (თეთრი ხმაურის მოძრაობა)²⁴, the “Iare Pekhiti” organization (იარე ფეხით)²⁵, and “Auditorium 115” (აუდიტორია # 115)²⁶.

Participation of Students in Social Activities

A particular group of the young generation is student youth, some of which soon will have a chance to constitute the future “new elite” of society. Therefore, their actions and political behaviors are essential for the future of the state. According to the research report of CURE of 2017, civic activity is significant for the majority of students. However, these are the declared answers, as 42.6% of the students participating in the study did not participate in any social activities, and 23% participated in similar initiatives in the last year. Interesting data was also revealed when analyzing the students’ responses in terms of gender. In particular, it was found that over half of the respondents who showed civic activity were male. In addition, 49% of active students were from the Tbilisi State University named after Ivane Javakhishvili. Moreover, 67% of the respondents are not members of any public organization. Women are more interested in social organizations. 36% are members of associations, while men participating in the organization are fewer (only 28%)²⁷.

Research conducted at other universities has shown that civic participation is relatively low. The respondents underlined a number of important factors that prevent citizens from being active in the socio-political space. Financial

²³ K. Charkhalashvili, *Green Fist SOS*, “Georgian Journal” 2014, <https://www.georgianjournal.ge/society/26239-green-fist-sos.html> [access: 19.03.2019].

²⁴ T. Papalashvili, *Fighting back against Georgia’s war on drugs*, “Open Democracy” 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/tamar-papalashvili/fighting-back-against-georgia-s-waren-drugs> [access: 10.02.2019].

²⁵ N. Gugunishvili, *I. Pekhiti Presents Results of Walkability Survey*, „Georgia Today” 2016, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/5533/lare-Pekhiti-Presents-Results-of-Walkability-Survey> [access: 19.03.2019].

²⁶ T. Bakakuri, *Beyond top-down democratisation: protests of Georgian students, ‘ravers’ and workers*, Georgian Institute of Politics, <http://gip.ge/tag/auditorium-115/> [access: 1.03.2019].

²⁷ A. Bezhanishvili, L. Zaalishvili, L. Macharashvili, Sh. Chkheidze, S. Khurtsidze, *კვლევის ანგარიში „სამოქალაქო აქტივიზმის მნიშვნელობა საქართველოს სტუდენტებისათვის”* 2017 https://cure.erasmus-plus.org.il/pluginfile.php/2716/mod_resource/content/2/Students%20Activism%20in%20Georgia_Research_report_GEO.pdf [access: 17.03.2019].

resources are a significant problem as students struggle to find the necessary funds to implement existing ideas²⁸. However, according to N. Phavlenishvili, student youth from other universities are very active in the social sphere – they create new non-governmental organizations, movements and participate in demonstrations to defend human rights and ecology. There is now also a new tendency to try to stay away from political action. According to it, a small number of students are part of the electoral parties running in the parliamentary elections²⁹.

As part of the survey, the respondents emphasized the low culture of civic activity in the university space. Most of them give average or lower estimates of civic participation. As it turns out, students show no interest in learning outside of teaching activities, but in some cases, the university space itself is closed to other activities. Respondents discussed two types of examples where students demonstrate a high culture of civic activism. In the first case, they talk about the most important and somewhat scandalous matters of the state that are of particular interest to the public. The second are education-related problems. Such topics are of interest to Georgian students, and examples of civic participation are related to these issues³⁰.

In the case of countries where political parties represent opposition ideologies, young people joining party organizations approach such a party, aspiring to become its member and replace the old elite. The situation in Georgia is different – the Georgian political system is devoid of ideological competition. The youth wing of political parties is rarely a way of recruiting political elites and preparing for a political career. According to research, the primary motivation for young people to join the wings of political parties is access to various resources (lectures, training, conferences), career development (not necessarily a political career), and personal contacts³¹.

Conclusions and Implications

Negative attitudes of young people toward socio-political life can be attributed to political processes that do not take into account the interests of young people. They are also more critical of the existing political elite. The new young

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Interview with N. Pavlenishvili, 20 February 2019.

³⁰ Ebert Foundation, *Generation in Transition: Youth Study 2016 Georgia*, 2017, <http://www.fes-caucasus.org/news-list/e/generation-in-transition-youth-study-2016-georgia/> [access: 10.02.2019].

³¹ Ibidem.

generation of people in socio-political reality will have to deal with problems concerning themselves. A natural result of the undemocratic past in the post-Soviet area is that members of political parties are often without political experience, and parliamentarians are usually representatives of business or public service elites, which is one of the factors why the younger generation distrusts the political elite. Moreover, political ties are mainly based on nepotism. Consequently, young people are less attractive to the political elite, and party leaders do not change the staff structure. The involvement of young people would be beneficial not only for political organizations but also for the development of the state's political culture as a whole, especially in times of globalization³².

According to T. Turmanidze, there are various groups with different views and interests among the young generation of Georgians – some are more active in political and social life, join various political parties, interest groups, and social movements. In contrast, others are less active and more oriented toward career development in the public and private sectors. There are also many socially and politically inactive young people who are just trying to find a job with a fixed wage to survive and do not have the time or desire to become civic once they find such a job. According to him, unemployment, which is currently the main socio-economic problem in Georgia, and the lack of conviction that participation in political life can make fundamental changes have a negative impact on the role of young people in the political life of the state, often contributing to the emigration of many young Georgians to the US and EU³³.

Z. Davitashvili claims that the young generation does not occupy a special place in the Georgian social and political space. A large part of the youth tries to remain apolitical, passively participating in the socio-political activities that take place in the state. Such a low level of political activity is a threat to democracy, one of the critical determinants of which is the participation of citizens in governing, e.g., by exercising the active right to vote. Special attention of practitioners, politicians, researchers, activists of various civic organizations should be focused on passivity and weaker interest in the sphere of politics of the youngest voters because they are the future of a democratic society³⁴. Therefore, it seems necessary to reflect on their weaker political activity's motives and initiate attempts to break it. Otherwise, democracy managed by

³² T. Turashvili, *Youth Participation in Electoral Processes and the Role of Political Elites*, GIP Report 2016, <http://gip.ge/youth-participation-in-electoral-processes-and-the-role-of-political-elites/> [access: 13.04.2019].

³³ Interview with T. Turmanidze, 28 February 2019.

³⁴ Interview with Z. Davitashvili, 24 February 2019.

today's youth may turn out to be a democracy without citizens and social capital of trust.

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Political Activity of the Young Generation of Georgians in 2011–2019

Summary

The paper aims to examine the political activity of young Georgians. The research statement of this paper is that the negative attitudes of young people toward social and political life can be attributed to political processes that do not take into account the interests of young people. In addition, the young generation is mostly politically active in the form of protests. To analyze this scientific objective, we have used several research methods based partly on secondary and primary sources, i.e., expert interviews were conducted online with Georgian researchers from Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. The paper is part of a series of papers on the opinions of the young generation of Georgians about democracy and democratization. The study is essential for analyzing the perception of the mentioned concepts among the generations in Georgia.

Keywords: political activity, political behavior, Georgians, young Georgians, young generation, civil society

Политическая активность молодого поколения в Грузии в 2011–2019 гг.

Резюме

Целью статьи является изучение политической активности молодых в Грузии. По мнению авторов, негативное отношение молодежи к общественной и политической жизни может быть связано с политическими процессами, не учитывающими интересы более молодой части общества. Кроме того, молодое поколение в основном проявляет политическую активность в форме протестов. Для анализа этой научной цели мы использовали ряд исследовательских методов (проведены экспертные интервью онлайн с грузинскими исследователями из Тбилисского государственного университета Иване Джавахишвили и государственного университета Или). Статья является частью серии статей, посвященных мнению молодого поколения в Грузии о демократии

и демократизации. Исследование необходимо для анализа восприятия вышеуказанных концепций поколениями в Грузии.

Ключевые слова: политическая деятельность, политическое поведение, грузины, молодые грузины, молодое поколение, гражданское общество