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Political Attitudes, Values, and Procedures in the Young Eastern European Democracies. A Case Study on the Attitudes toward Democracy of the Macedonian Students

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Abstract

Having in mind that Macedonian society is still in a process of democratic transition, the discussion pertaining to the relevance and significance of democracy, as well as democratic awareness of its citizens, is one of the most contested issues in the political and academic debates in the Republic of Macedonia. The paper examines the attitudes towards democracy of the student population in the Republic of Macedonia, analyzed through the following aspects: citizen participation, citizen activism and political affiliation. The project entitled "Virtual and Real Identities in the Republic of Macedonia" - conducted by the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, served as a basis for our research. The findings suggest that the Macedonian society should pay more attention on development of democratic awareness of its young people through educational system and other institutions.

Keywords: democracy, attitudes, citizen participation, civic activism and political affiliation.

1. Introduction

'Democracy' is one of the most used and arguable concepts in more recent history, i.e. in the age of so-called Third Wave of democratization and particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The definitions and the operationalizing of this concept vary. Hence, even though there is no universally accepted definition, there are two

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approaches in defining 'democracy': 'minimal' and 'maximal'. The first one focuses on the importance of 'means', that is, procedures such as fair elections, respect for human rights, and universal suffrage. In contrast, maximal definitions include not only democratic procedures but also 'ends', or outputs (such as economic equality and social services) (Baviskar and Malone, 2004: 4).

The Republic of Macedonia gained its independence in the year 1991 following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Taking into consideration the fact that it is a relatively young democratic country, Macedonian society is still regarded as a society in a democratic transition¹. Thus, discussion pertaining to the relevance and significance of democracy, as well as democratic awareness of its citizens, is one of the most contested issues in the political and academic debates in the Republic of Macedonia. The issue of the level of democratic awareness of the citizens is of a great importance having in mind, in particular, the fact that a stable democratic regime does not only require well-designed and functioning political institutions and processes to be sustainable and consolidated, it requires democrats (Mattes et al., 1999).

This paper gives an insight into the democratic awareness of young people in Macedonia, in particular about their attitudes, values and practices in terms of democratic principles. Our findings rely on the data from the project entitled "*Virtual and Real Identities in the Republic of Macedonia*", conducted by the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia. The project was based on the research of political attitudes and identities of the student population in Macedonia, by direct surveying of respondents. The survey was conducted from September 2012 until July 2013. The survey was undertaken among the students at the Universities in Skopje, Bitola, Shtip and Tetovo. Three of these universities were public, while the other two were private. The number of respondents in the survey is representative for the Republic of Macedonia in terms of ethnicity, gender, religion, place of residence, and region². It covered a sample of 707 respondents. General characteristics of the sample were the following: 707 students from 5 state universities and 2 private universities; 256 male and 451 female; Macedonians 442, Albanians 239 and others 26; 201 living in rural and 504 in urban area³.

The survey questionnaire includes questions that explore students' attitudes towards democracy, in particular their interest in politics and their civic engagement:

Q: "Are the students interested in politics?"

Q: "How often do they discuss about politics with their friends?"

Q: "Which political ideology is closest to students?"

Q: "Students' willingness to participate in civic activities?"

Q: "Students' engagement in civic associations?"

Yet, it has to be emphasized that the paper presents only preliminary analysis and evaluations of the empirical findings of our institutional research project.

Having in mind that the paper focuses on the attitudes towards democracy of the Macedonian students, the notions of 'democracy', 'citizen participation', and 'civic activism' are to be further defined and elaborated on.

¹ According to Linz and Stepan (1996) a democratic transition is complete when a sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote, when this government de facto has the authority to generate new policies, and when the executive, legislative and judicial powers generated by the new democracy does not have to share the power with the other bodies de jure.

² Despite the Macedonian majority (66, 6%) there are other ethnic communities living on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia: Albanian ethnic community (22, 7%), Turkish (4, 0%), Serbian (2, 1%), Vlachs (0, 4%) and others (1, 9%). Regarding the religious affiliation, 67% of the population belongs to the Christian- orthodox religion and 30% to Islam.

³ According to the data of the State Statistical Office obtained on the basis of received reports, there were 57 746 enrolled students in the Republic of Macedonia in the academic year 2013/2014, an increase of 1.5% compared to the academic year 2012/2013. The number of enrolled female students was 31 450 or 54.5%. The majority of students, 88.5%, were enrolled in public tertiary institutions, while 11.1% were enrolled in private tertiary institutions.

2. Understanding Democracy

In political theory, 'democracy' is described as a political philosophy, but also as a form of governing, where the governing power lies in the hands of people, and it may be exercised either in an immediate (direct democracy) or intermediate manner (indirect democracy), i.e. according to the principle of presentation and representation of interests realized by virtue of free and fair elections. Modern or contemporary interpretation of democracy is connected with the philosophical principle of equal rights. Hence, the notion of democracy is occasionally used in the context of liberal democracy, which on the other hand implies existence of certain additional elements, such as political pluralism, equality before the law, civil freedoms and civil rights. Furthermore, these elements represent parameters regarding the level of democracy within society (Atanasov and Cvetanova, 2013: 27).

Different scholars define 'democracy' in different ways. Definitions of democracy are often influenced by the aspect they emphasize. For example: some of the definitions focus on the institutions and procedures of democratic governance, others on political aspect i.e. freedom and liberties, and still others take into account the social dimension, i.e. social benefits.

These three broad alternatives – institutions and procedures, freedom and liberties, and social benefits – constitute the primary substantive choices in defining democracy. Certainly people will offer other responses if asked to define democracy spontaneously. Yet the extent to which democracy is defined in terms of these three broad choices provides a framework to assess the high levels of public support for democracy in recent public-opinion surveys and the implications of these democratic aspirations. Each alternative has different implications for the interpretation of public opinion toward democracy and the principles that guide the democratization process (Dalton, Shin, and Jou, 2007: 145).

Despite many definitions and different approaches in defining democracy, political theory highlights three pillars that underpin democracy: transparency, accountability and right to participate. Therefore, citizen participation – as one of the three pillars – is regarded widely as vital to democracy. The classic Kantian distinction between active and passive citizens implies that only those citizens who in one way or another actively participate in decision-making are indeed different from the subjects of a nondemocratic polity (Weinrib, 2008).

Free and active participation and involvement of citizens in the political life of any country is the principal characteristic of democracy. When it comes to contemporary democratic systems, citizens are allowed to discuss freely their problems, express and voice their dissatisfaction and complaints and request changes. (Atanasov, Cvetanova, 2013: 33).

Citizen participation may be defined as a process in which ordinary people take part – whether on a voluntary or obligatory basis and whether acting alone or as part of a group – with the goal of influencing a decision involving significant choices that will affect their community. Such participation may or may not take place within an institutional framework, and it may be organized either by members of civil society (for example, through class action, demonstrations citizens' committees, etc.) or by decision makers (for example, through referendums, parliamentary commissions and mediation (André, 2010).

Civic activism refers to citizens' involvement on a voluntary basis in civic activities related to community, often connected with duties and obligations, but also associated with membership in civic organizations as well as participation in nonviolent demonstrations and petitions.

In the following chapter, attitudes towards democracy of Macedonian students will be analyzed from the perspectives of their interests in politics, their political affiliation, citizen participation and civic activism.

3. Findings and Discussion

For reasons pertaining to the project goals, and in order to examine attitudes towards democracy of the student population in the Republic of Macedonia, a questionnaire – divided into logical groups – has been designed.

The first group of questions obtained data for the student' interest in politics: "How often they talk about political issues", and "What is their ideological affiliation".

On the question "Are you interested in politics?" most of the students declared that they are partially interested in politics 48.7%, very interested are 18.2% whereas 32.9% are not interested. Considering the variable

“Faculties”, the greatest interest in politics is observed in students studying Political science and students of Law faculties, which confirms the expectations with regard to the data analysis. However, when the data is discussed in terms of “Ethnicity” and “Gender”, there is a statistically significant difference.

From the aspect of ethnicity, 26.4% of the respondents that belong to Albanian ethnic community are very interested in politics, whereas the Macedonians are only 14.1% very interested.

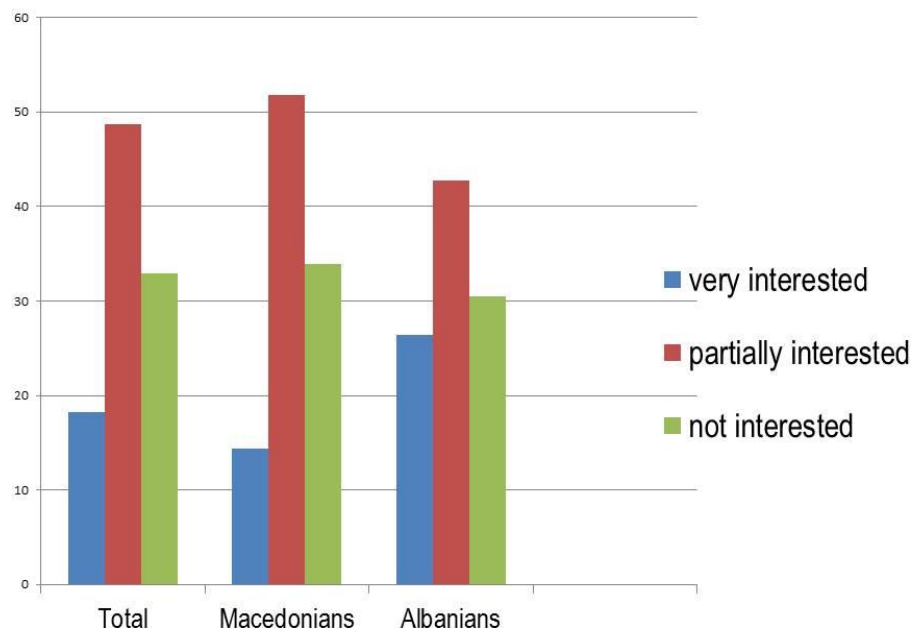


Figure 1.
Q: “Are you interested in politics?” (Ethnic Variable)

The increased interest in politics among the students that belong to Albanian ethnic community, as opposed to Macedonians, is probably due to the fact that they consider the Implementation of the *Ohrid Framework Agreement*⁴ i.e. the resolving ethnic issues as an open, and still ongoing process.

An interesting fact is that male students are more interested in politics than female students. Hence, very interested in politics are 28.6% male students and 12.2% of the female, partly interested are 49% of male and 48.4% of female students, and generally not interested are 22.4% of male and 38.9% of female students.

⁴ The *Ohrid Framework Agreement* ended the seven-month armed conflict between the Albanian Paramilitary Formation called National Liberation Army and Macedonian security forces in 2001. The objective of the Agreement was to meet the requirements on the part of the Albanian ethnic community in Macedonia, but at the same time for the purpose of preserving the unitary character of the state. The Document incorporated both general principles and suggestions for solving concrete interethnic problems, such as: decentralization, non-discrimination in public service, special parliamentary procedures for changing the constitution and other major laws, education and language matters, as well as the expression of identity. The Agreement was implemented in the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Macedonia.

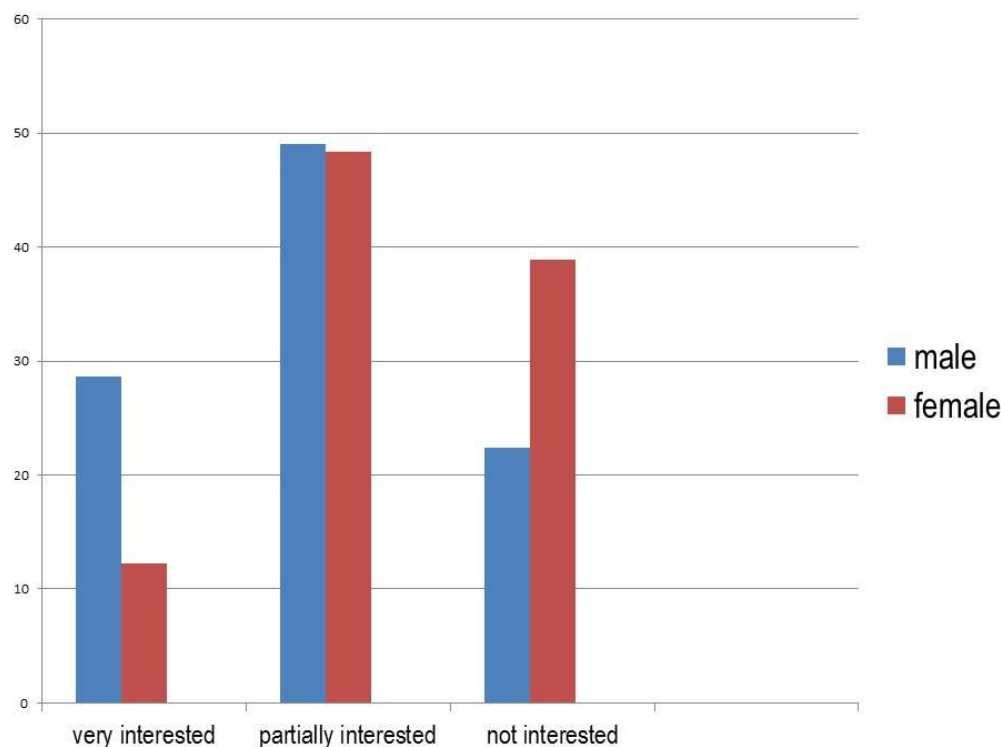


Figure 2.
Q: "Are you interested in politics?" (Gender Variable)

A lack of interest in politics among female students could be interpreted in the light of general negative attitude to women and their representation and participation in politics due to the traditional and conservative values which are typical for the cultural background of the people living in Macedonia. This negative attitude is reflected in the number of women in politics which is significantly lower compared to the number of men, particularly in terms of the executive and local government.⁵

How often students discuss political issues with their friends is one of the indicators that show are they really interested in politics. To this question 17.8% choose the answer "very often", 19.8% answers "never", and 61.6% of the students "sometimes" discuss about politics.

⁵ None of the governments in the Republic of Macedonia, since the very independence and continuing to present date, has had more than two female ministers in its government structure. As far as their representation and participation in the local self-government is concerned, in the course of the latest local elections held in the year 2014, fewer than five percent of the candidates running for the office of mayor were women, and only 4 (3,4%) of them were elected a mayor. The increased percentage of women represented in the legislative power is primarily due to the changes introduced to the Election Law. In compliance with these changes, when submitting their list of candidates for members of parliament the political parties are to adhere to their legal obligation stipulating that every third candidate is to be female. Such an obligation secures and guarantees a greater representation of women in the legislative power.

How often do you discuss about politics with your friends?

■ very often ■ sometimes ■ never

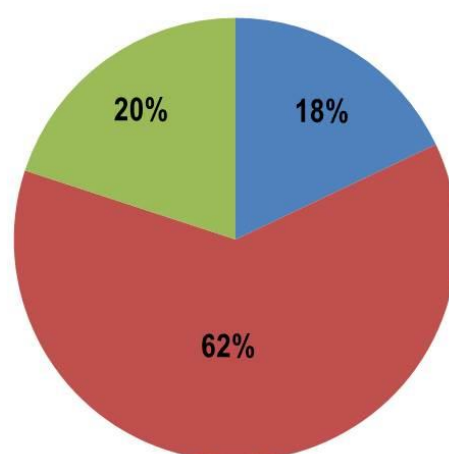


Figure 3.

Q: "How often do you discuss about politics with your friends?"

The cross tabulation data from the questions "Are you interested in politics?" and "How often do you discuss about politics with your friends?" showed that although 48,7% of the students declared that they are not interested in politics, 47,8 % of this category sometimes discuss about political issues.

Table 1. Cross tabulation of the questions:

Q: "Are you interested in politics?"

Q: "How often do you discuss about politics with your friends?"

Are you interested in politics?		How often do you discuss about politics with your friends?			
		Very often	Sometimes	Never	Total
	Very interested	56.3%	41.4%	2.3%	100%
	Partly interested	13.7%	78.7%	7%	100%
	Not interested	2.6%	47.8%	48.7%	100%
	Total	17.8%	61.6%	19.9%	

The existence of various political options with different ideological affiliation lays the foundation of a pluralistic form of democratic rule. Hereunder is presented the ideological orientation of the Macedonian students and the ratio of the left wing, right wing or center-oriented.

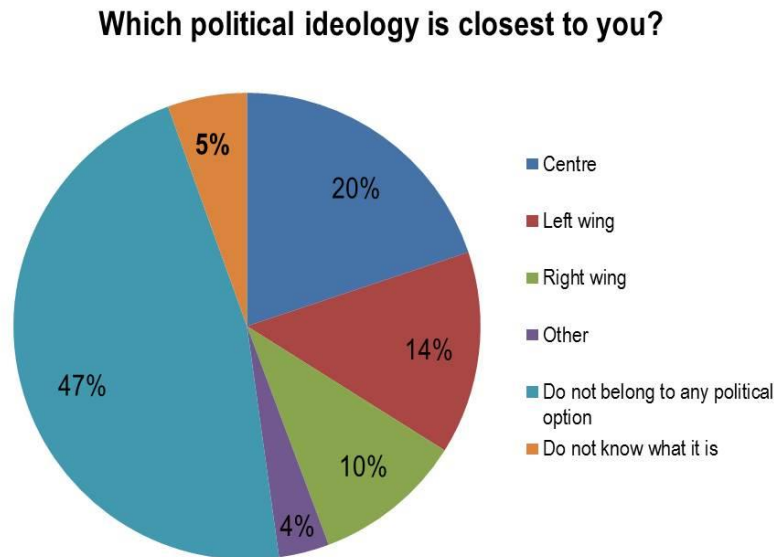


Figure 4.
Q: "Which political ideology is closest to you?"

The majority of Macedonian students do not declare their ideological affiliation, i.e. a high percentage of 46.8% of the respondents stated that they do not belong to any political option. The percentage of the respondents that declared themselves as center-oriented amounts to 19.5%, whereas 10.4% characterized themselves as right wing-oriented and 13.9% as left wing-oriented.

With reference to the three aforementioned political options, most of the Macedonian students have declared themselves as center-oriented. Nevertheless, in the course of almost all parliamentary elections held in the Republic of Macedonia these political parties had significantly fewer voters compared to the left wing and right wing political parties.

Concerning the fact that the majority of Macedonian students are politically and ideologically undeclared, it may be interpreted in two ways. The students are insufficiently informed and educated with regard to the basic principles and postulates of the different political ideologies or they cannot perceive and differentiate the ideological affiliation when it comes to the activities undertaken by the left-wing and right-wing parties present on the political stage in the Republic of Macedonia. Namely, even though they are very precise concerning their ideological affiliation in their respective political platforms, when it comes to their activities, they do not always adhere to their policies (in particular pertaining to welfare and economy) which are distinctive and distinguishable for the political option they belong to.

Democracy represents a system of governing in which the expression of dissatisfaction regarding a given governmental politics, decision or state is a legitimate right to each and every citizen without being intimidated by any consequences (Atanasov, Cvetanova, 2013: 31). The willingness of the students to be active in initiating social and political issues will be shown through the next group of questions.

Each question refers to a different type of civic activity: to sign a petition for social or political issue; to participate in setting up social or political demands; to participate in political and social protests that are legally allowed.

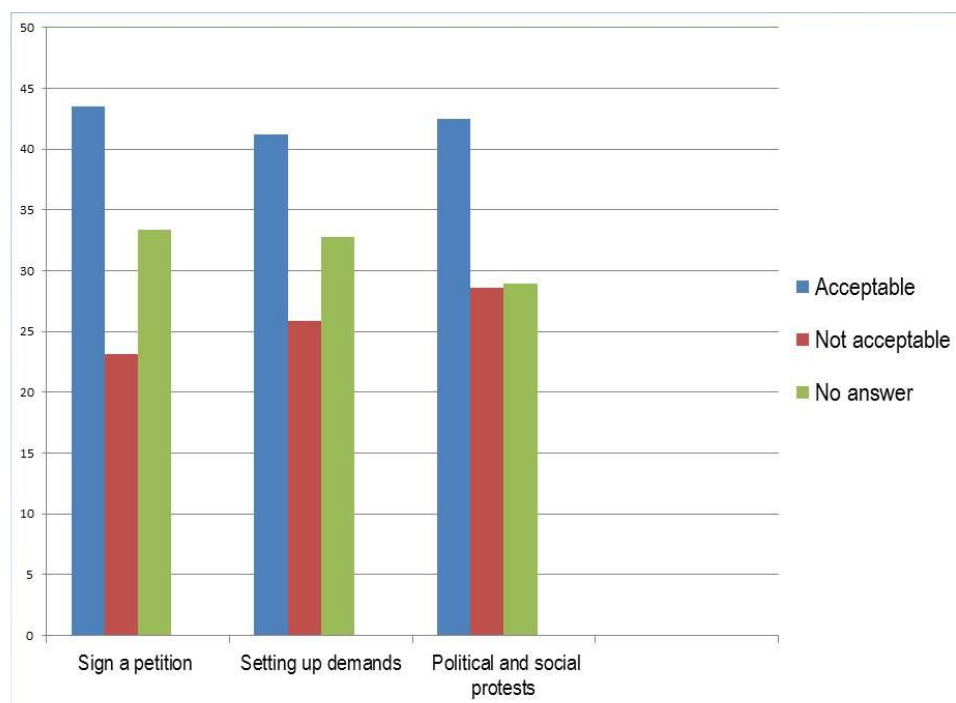


Figure 5.

To sign a petition for social or political issues;
To participate in setting up social or political demands;
To participate to political and social protests legally allowed.

Figure 5 shows that all three types of civic activities do not affect the distribution of responses. It means that all types of activities are equally acceptable (almost 43%) for the students. Yet, when it comes to the response “not acceptable”, there is difference in the percentages:

Table 2. Types of civic activities (percentages of the answer “not acceptable”)

	To sign a petition for social or political issues	To participate in setting up social or political demands	To participate in political and social protests that are legally allowed
Not acceptable	23.1%	25.9%	28.6%

Hence, it should be noted that this answers reflect only the willingness of the students to take participation in such activities. Hence, the question whether the students have already taken part in such civic activities - remains open.

The engagement in civic associations gives the students opportunity to raise issues related to community, social and political life, thus contributing to the general development of the society. Having in mind the fact that active participation in civic organizations is one of the indicators that determine the level of democratic awareness, the students were asked about their membership and activities in civic organizations and association.

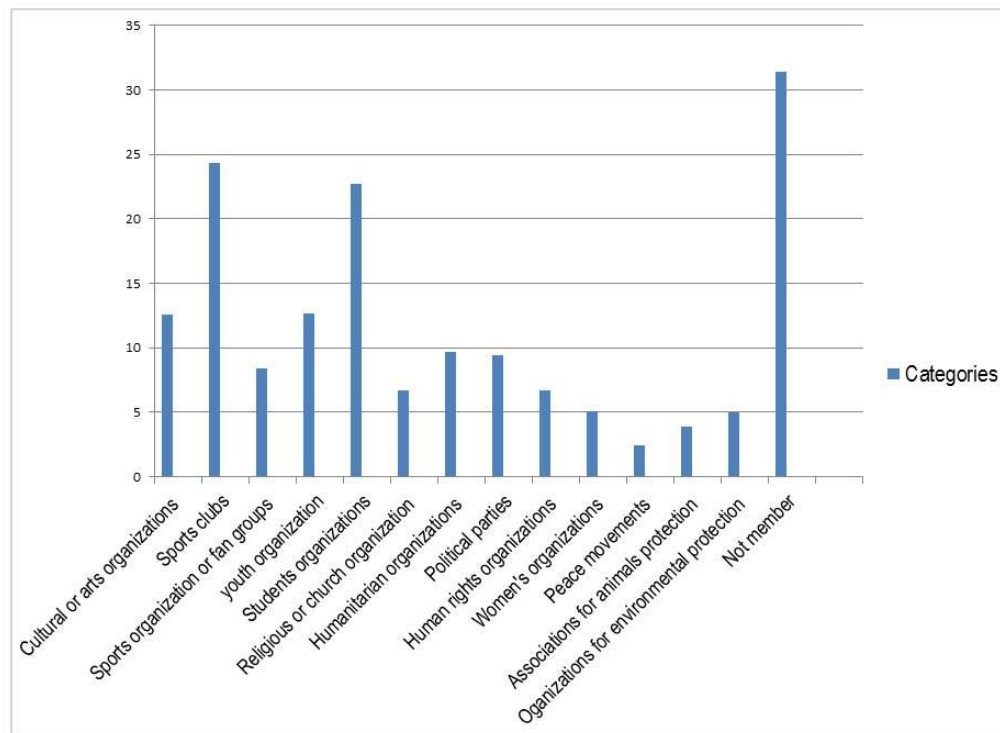


Figure 6.

Q: "Are you a member of any organization or association?"

From the total number of the respondents, a major part (almost 70%) consists in members of civic associations opposed to 31.4% that are not members of any.

The highest percentages of students are members of Sports clubs (24.3%) and Student associations (22.7%), followed by Youth organizations (12.7%); Cultural and art organizations (12.6%); Humanitarian organizations (9.7%); and Political parties (9.4%). Students are least interested in organizations for Environmental protection (5%), Associations for animal's protection (3.9%) and Peace movements (2.4%).

4. Limitations of the Current Approach

The paper has some limitations. A major, though natural limitation comes from the fact that in this paper only preliminary analysis and evaluations of the empirical findings of our institutional research project are presented. Another limitation is the lack of comparative analytical perspective involving some other dimensions, such as:

comparison of students' attitudes towards democracy with those of their fellow citizens in general and of their age cohort; comparison of students that are interested in politics with those that are not interested in terms of their political and civic engagement; comparison of students who are politically determined and those who are not in terms of their political and civic engagement, etc. Further research should be undertaken in order to investigate the analytical perspective on these topics.

5. Conclusions and Further Developments

Republic of Macedonia is a relatively young democratic state. Therefore, discussion pertaining to the relevance and significance of democracy, as well as democratic awareness of its citizens, is one of the most contested issues in the political and academic debates in the Republic of Macedonia. In this paper, the attitudes towards democracy of Macedonian students were analyzed through the prism of their interest in politics, their political affiliation, citizen participation and civic activism.

The analyzed data provided a clearer image of the Macedonian students' attitudes. The data enabled us to gain an insight into the political affiliation on the part of Macedonian students, their civic activities and to what extent they are interested in politics.

By virtue of the results obtained in the course of the conducted survey, we may reach the following general conclusions about the attitudes towards democracy of Macedonian students:

Most of the students declared that they are partially interested in politics;

Students that belong to Albanian ethnic community are twice more "very interested in politics" than the Macedonians;

Male students are more interested in politics than female;

Although 48,7% of the students declared that are not interested in politics, 47,8 % of this category sometimes discuss political issues;

The majority of Macedonian students are undeclared when it comes to their ideological affiliation;

Despite the fact that most of the Macedonian students have declared themselves as centre-oriented, in the course of almost all parliamentary elections held in the Republic of Macedonia these political parties had significantly fewer votes compared to the left wing and right wing political parties;

All types of civic activities (to sign a petition for social or political issue, participation in setting up social or political demands and participation in political and social protests that are legally allowed) are equally acceptable for the students;

Many respondents (the vast number of the total respondents) are members of civic associations.

The highest percentages of students are members of Sports clubs and Student associations.

The students are least interested in organizations for Environmental protection, Associations for animal's protection and Peace movements.

The Republic of Macedonia is still paving its own way to democratic transition. In order to have a stable democratic regime, beside the well-designed and functioning political institutions and processes, we also need democrats. Hence, we may come to a general conclusion that Macedonian society should pay more attention on development of democratic awareness of the young people, through deployment of all disposable capacities and potentials, in particularly the educational system, the overall civil society, as well as the political elites.

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