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**The Youth and Elections: Russian Experience**  
**(problems of participation, legal culture, development of civil society)**

**1. Formulation of the problem.** Any state puts its hopes on the youth. However, what is the role the young generation is ready to play in the development of democracy, civil society and a law-based state? Undoubtedly, this question is raised in all states and it is topical for Russia as well. The Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation has readily responded to this possibility to share its experience. We hope that the experience of Russian election officials in working with the young voters will be interesting for you.

Each fifth Russian voter is a young person. However, we believe that the problem of involvement of the youth in the electoral process is exceptionally important not only because of the quantitative aspect. Young people inherit all achievements and all problems in the development of the state and society and, at the same time, form by themselves the image of the future of the country. The sense of civic duty, responsibility and experience which young people receive when they are starting out in life are carried by them throughout their lives and lay the basis on which they raise the next generation of citizens. This is something we must remember.

**2. Results of sociological surveys.** I will cite several generalized characteristics of young people revealed in 2002 by sociological surveys conducted in three regions – Moscow, the Moscow and Arkhangelsk oblasts. The surveys showed that young Russians are poorly informed about their rights, political parties and youth organizations, about who can represent their interests, represent them in the bodies of power and about their own duties and responsibilities. Young voters regard the voting procedure as a formality and the election results as being predictable. Over 40% of the polled young people mistrust the political institutions of the country; 65% condemn politics as "dirty business"; 44% believe that the youth are not ready to be responsible for the society in which they live. It cannot be said, however, that a negative attitude to elections is predominant among the youth. Thus, 20% of the young respondents realize that elections are a necessary mechanism of the lawful change of power, 10% that elections help safeguard the interests of the people, 9% that elections provide the means for influencing the political course pursued by the authorities.

So, the youth mistrust the state power, are poorly informed and do not see their place in society.

**3. Reasons for the existing situation.** At present, two diametrically opposed tendencies can be observed among young Russians (people aged 18 – 30 years): on the one hand, it is the wish to participate in the political life of the country, on the other, it is apathy towards all political processes taking place in Russia. It must be admitted that these two world outlooks are incommensurate with regard to the number of people who represent them: the latter outlook is much more widespread and its consequences are much more significant.

We believe that electoral activity is one of the most important indicators of the civic maturity of the youth and their attitude to the reforms carried out in the country. This is why the results of election campaigns of various levels cause our concern.

Unfortunately, elections often confirm the fact that everywhere it is people of the retirement age that vote for the future of the youth. On the average, the number of young people taking part in federal elections is less by half than the number of older people: actually they account for not more than 30 – 35% of the voter turnout or even less in regional and local elections. Absenteeism is also prevalent among the young people who are to vote for the first time and who, it would seem, must come to the polls out of pure curiosity so characteristic of youth.

What is the reason why young people do not come to the polls? The Russian election officials are profoundly analyzing this phenomenon; we take into account the opinion of specialists in the problems of the youth, experts and political scientists; conduct sociological surveys and public opinion polls; take various measures to arouse the interest of young people in elections.

Nevertheless, we do face rather disconcerting and alarming tendencies. We think that there are three main reasons why young people lack stable and serious motives for participation in elections.

The first reason. Even though a large part of the youth is ready for political self-realization, this readiness is still realized inadequately, largely because of poor development of the appropriate institutions. It must be admitted that the Russian political parties are not a sufficiently influential force compared, for instance, with the institutions of power, which, when necessary can change the shape and structure of the political realm. For young people who lack life experience it is not easy to formulate their political preferences, views and make a choice in favor of this or that ideology, position, and idea.

It goes without saying that the public and political organizations of the country as well as institutions of power need the inflow of young professionals and intellectuals. Therefore, they often form youth structures associated with parties. However, it must be admitted that the Russian parties are yet at the very beginning of this path, although, of course, they already realize the importance of youth programs. Unfortunately, the number of effectively operating all-Russian youth organizations is still few. Meanwhile, the surveys show that 40% of young respondents believe that it is easier to realize one's rights together with a group of like-minded people and 25% that this can be done more easily with the aid of an organization.

For young people, ordinary work in party structures is not prestigious and attractive since the parties cannot compete with other spheres of activity in their financial and career possibilities. Neither do the parties play a large role or enjoy prestige in the Russian provincial areas; there is lack of information about their day-by-day routine activities.

In addition to this, both candidates for elective offices and the political parties organize their election campaigns with little attention to the youth and students. Thus, in the frequency of being referred to, the youth rank is the 2nd and students are 13th among 15 groups of voters mentioned in the election propaganda materials of deputy candidates.

The second reason. Young people do not perceive and are not aware of the value of freedom and democracy: they did not live in the past - Soviet - society, were never subjected to the bans and restraints inherent in this society and did not fight for the right to live in the conditions of democratic society as was the case with the greater part of the older generation. Young people received all this at birth and believe

civil rights to be their natural asset. Therefore, one does not have to fight for them, there are no stable interests and objectives and, as a result, no need to vote for political parties or political leaders that might defend, safeguard and represent the rights, freedoms and interests of citizens, including young ones.

And the third reason. Formation of a civil position is connected not only with the problem of socialization of the youth but also with the problem of the presence of stable traditions in a family, society, state. Voting in free elections, free choice of one of several parties has not yet become a strong democratic tradition in our country. According to a sociological survey conducted in 2004 in the Tver oblast on the average it is only each fifth or sixth respondent who regards participation in elections of various levels to be his or her civil duty. And yet, such tradition is now being formed.

So, what remain are chance influences and this explains the low level of electoral activity of the youth. In addition to this, inexperienced young people often become an object of manipulation by dishonest politicians, which discredits the institutions of state power in the eyes of the youth, undermines the trust in free and fair elections.

**4. Other manifestations of civil activity of the youth.** Apart from the exercise of an active electoral right, i.e., the right to elect, there are other forms in which young people participate in the electoral process, such as running for elective offices in the bodies of state power.

The Russian electoral legislation grants this right to citizens of the country aged 21 years and older. In the 2003 parliamentary elections 459 deputy candidates, i.e., 8%, were aged fewer than 30. Compared with the elections in the years 1995 – 1999 the number of young deputy candidates grew more than by two times. Nine deputies elected to the new lower chamber belong to this category of citizens. We think that this is a good result demonstrating a high opinion held by Russian voters of their young fellow citizens.

Positive shifts are also manifest in regional elections. Whereas in the mid-1990s young people accounted for slightly more than 2% of deputy candidates and their proportion among the elected deputies was even less, by the years 2003 – 2004 these figures have grown by four times.

Therefore, the most active part of the youth clearly wants to get into politics. This tendency has to be supported, including at the level of regional representative bodies and elective bodies of local self-government, where the youth might be more welcome and could receive the necessary political and managerial experience.

Still another task that we have is to induce young people to show interest in the organization and administration of elections. We think that the participation of young people in the work of election commissions is inadequate. For instance, election commissions of the Subjects of the Russian Federation have at best one voting member aged fewer than 30; the same is true of most territorial election commissions.

This task might be handled with much greater attention and more successfully by political parties, election blocs represented in the State Duma or in the bodies of legislative power of the Subjects of the Russian Federation, which, under the election laws, have the right to make proposals for the formation of election commissions.

However, there is quite another kind of experience as well. In the recent federal elections, in some districts of the Rostov oblast there were precinct election commissions consisting mostly of young people, which did not only allowed the young people to show their worth but also greatly enhanced the interest and trust of other youths in elections.

**5. Measures to involve the youth in the electoral process, some results.** The tendencies and tasks mentioned above provided a sufficient and necessary basis on which election commissions organized purposeful work with young voters. Actually this work began as early as 1995 and now it is carried on in various spheres of the life of young people, with the participation of state and public organizations, bodies of local self-government, taking into account the diversity of age, educational and other characteristics of the young generation. One of the tasks of the Russian Center for Training in Election Technologies, successfully operating at the CEC of Russia, is to render methodological assistance to election officials in the work with the youth. However, what is most important is the direct participation of young people in our projects, the initiatives coming from the youth, rather than what has been done by the public and the state.

In this connection the experience of the Russian regions is highly instructive. For instance, the election commission of the Rostov oblast started the educational process from children: a book was prepared for children of pre-school and grade-school age, entitled "Travels of an Alien in Russia," with a subtitle "Why do we need elections?" In a simple and easy-to-understand form it tells children how the people elect their representatives to govern the state, how laws are adopted and by whom, how the laws operate and who is responsible for their observance.

But, of course, systematic legal education begins at school where at the lessons devoted to social subjects the children receive the knowledge about the state system of the country and the history of its development, the electoral system, the rights and obligations of a citizen. Nevertheless, the scope and depth of presentation of social subjects should be increased.

The inculcation of a sense of civic duty also implies that young people will actively master the skills in political activity and behavior. This does not only mean Olympiads or competitions in social subjects and election law, general political debates, youth festivals, forums and other events of various natures, which are held in schools and colleges. What I have in mind is bodies of self-government of the youth as a highly effective form of involving young people in running the state and, simultaneously, as a school of the electoral process.

To-day it can be admitted that the parliamentary movement of the youth has gone far beyond the initial idea and has not become a child's play on a legal basis: elections are held with all attributes and stages characteristic of the electoral process, followed by serious work with discussions, adoption of decisions, preparation of youth programs, etc.

It must be noted that youth parliamentarism was not developing according to a single scheme. In this respect the regions were quite independent: in some of them this initiative did not receive any support while in some others (such as Altai krai, the Belgorod, Novosibirsk, Sverdlovskaya and other oblasts) youth parliaments, dumas, governments operate in many urban and rural areas or as provisional bodies – in summer youth sports camps.

Thus, in Arkhangelsk the Youth Parliament has already gone through two convocations. The parliament consists of two chambers: 43 deputies of the lower chamber are elected in single-mandate constituencies and 19 deputies of the upper chamber are appointed by the higher educational establishments and the public associations of the city. During these years a transition has been made from elections in single- and multi-mandate constituencies and a single urban constituency to elections only in single-mandate constituencies. On the average, 3 – 4 candidates were competing for one deputy mandate and the average voter turnout exceeded 50%.

In the regions where the work with the youth is carried on permanently and not formally, where the young generation is regarded as an equal partner, the results are more substantial. For instance, according to expert estimates, over several years the number of young voters taking part in elections has grown in the Arkhangelsk, Tver, Novosibirsk, Rostov and some other oblasts. (*Estimates: Rostov oblast, federal elections – by 7%, Sverdlovskaya oblast, federal elections – by 3 – 4%*).

The practical importance of the work of, for instance, the election commission of the Rostov oblast is demonstrated by the fact that Rostovites were included in the Russian delegation to the youth seminar "Youth and Elections" recently held in Budapest. Apart from a web site developed in the form of a virtual conference the colleagues showed interest in the experience in the realization of youth programs. The delegation also presented information about the creation of a computer game "The World of Democracy: Travel in Time," intended for high school and college students. At present, it is the only game of this kind.

**Conclusion.** Russia has presently accumulated certain experience in the work with the young generation of voters. Naturally, it is not at once that tangible results are achieved. But we are optimists and are permanently in quest of creative solutions. There are many tasks that still await their solution - in the sphere of civic and political education of the youth, for instance. A more active use must be made of the Internet, which is so popular among the young people. And other new solutions are needed...

In conclusion, on behalf of all Russian election officials, I want to reaffirm our intention to continue active work with young voters. We are firmly convinced that the main problem lies not only in assuring the necessary political and economic freedoms but also in teaching young Russians to be citizens in a new sense: to have legal consciousness, share the responsibility, take part in civic activities.

From this point of view we are in solidarity with the efforts of the member countries of the ACEEEO, directed to involving the youth in the electoral process and are ready jointly to take real steps and actions for this purpose.

## **Hungary**

The oldest methods of paying attention to the elections are billboards, telecommunication and press advertisements about the date of election. Besides these basic methods, in order to inform the population, each voter gets a brief information leaflet about the most important details of the forthcoming election by post. Under the editorship of the National Electoral Office, we publish so-called election booklets, which include all the information about the elections. One can find among them publications for the political parties in order to help nominating their candidates, collection of election laws, legal analysis works – and all of them are free of charge. In order to offer effective information, we operate an Election Information Service, which can be attained personally, by post, and electronic way. We also have a phone client service, which is accessible by a green number.

In accordance with the mentality of the modern time, since the 1997 NATO referendum, the elections have had an official website on [www.valasztas.hu](http://www.valasztas.hu) and [www.elections.hu](http://www.elections.hu). From the very beginning until its current status, it made a long way of development, and its information content made it the most complex method among all of the available methods. We emphasized the multilingualism already from the beginning, and in the 2003 EU-admission referendum the information was available in all the official languages used by the old and new member-states.

However, all the information methods we have introduced aim at the complexity of the voters, in other words the „world of the adults”. In order to encourage the case of the elections, we created a foundation, „Foundation for the Elections”. Many of its members are well-known legal experts, who have insisted for a long time on preparing an information strategy especially for the first voters, with special regard to the dissemination of information by the Internet. In order to motivate the young population, we made efforts before that; it became a kind of tradition to „welcome” the first voters. During the national elections, by the first cast of their votes they get a medal, a pen or a memorial certificate – this gesture is not enough of course.

The information package, prepared for the education-institutions seemed to be much more successful. From the primary schools to the universities, each institution gets its background package about the elections, prepared for the teachers which can be taught during the courses (in general during history courses), suited to the subject.

During the creation of the first voter-website, our motivation was the easy understanding. However, the content of the current multilingual and organized website covers each demand but the legal language is too difficult, too dry, too boring for the young people to discover it. So the most important characteristic of the website, launched first time in 2002 and prepared for the young people, was the decreased, and essential content. The language of the website is simple and direct. Despite this fact, the expected success was missing, which had two main reasons: firstly, there was not enough time before the 2002 elections to discover the website and on the other hand, it became clear that it is necessary to advertise the website itself and not only the elections.

Based on these experiences, in 2004, during the EU admission referendum, we developed our information strategy in the area of the information of the first voters.

On the one hand, refreshing the traditional paper-based information, we prepared an information booklet especially for the young people. Most part of the content is the presentation of the EU itself, as the word EU is often used in the everyday life as well, however, the institutions behind this name are unknown for most people, especially for the young population, who are the real beneficiaries of the admission. There is an excuse for us: even those, who have been EU nationalities for a long time, do not know too much about the bureaucracy of Brussels.

We transformed significantly the above-mentioned first voter website. We restructured the information according to the type of the election, and the „often asked questions” menu point got more emphasis. The general user, especially if he/she is young, will never read a several-page text in front of the screen in order to find the desired information. It is much more useful to group the elections and definitions of their institutions into such kind of menu as in many cases even the basic knowledge of the users is insufficient. A searching-machine helps to find the required information: if the user types the interested subject, the searching-machine shows all the relevant text details.

The graphics of the surface are simpler but more transparent than those of its predecessor; after all it is not a multimedia game but principally an information-website.

The strong marketing of the website was another innovation. The link of the first voter website was put on most public and other content-provider portal. In order to get a higher level of interest, we organized an EU Election Competition. The competition contained a series of tests-questions to be answered in the Internet, and the first prizes were mobile phones. The questions were formed that way that the answers could be given after reading the first voter homepage ([www.elsovalaszto.hu](http://www.elsovalaszto.hu)). It worked, as the attendance of the website increased by more than ten thousand persons during this period.

I have to mention some technical points as well. In Hungary, the quantity of the Internet access is still not satisfactory, however, its quality is a little above the EU average. Currently, the rate is approximately half-half among the households who use the traditional modem-based access or the quick ADSL one, this latter pushes more and more into the background the slow modem ones especially because of the high telephone charges. Those, who have the traditional access, can have a simpler but quick text page, while the ADSL users can see animations, films and sound version of the texts as well. The aim of this latter one is to help those, who have sight-problems and so practically we can be proud to have the user-friendliest election website of the EU.

The target audience can write its remarks by the function of the visitors' book – it was already functioning in the previous website and we made numerous innovations according to the remarks wrote in it.

Will all these efforts be enough to inform sufficiently the first voters? We hope it will, however we must be aware that we cannot expect wonders. It is mainly the task of the political parties to mobilize the voters and increase their number, we can only provide impartial information about the election itself, about its why and wherefore: the „the who and whom” must stay the question of the politics. We do not have any false belief that each young person studies election codes enthusiastically instead of the weekly cinema program.

We have to do everything so that more and more people know more and more about the election system of our country as they determine their future with their votes. We have to make them understand that power that the democracy gives into their hands so that they could responsibly influence the future of their country and people.