

EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA – SHAPING THE NOTION OF EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract. This study supports topical discussion about the possibilities to use social media as a tool for citizen involvement in democratic processes. Contemporary academic views and statistics on the use of social media for communication between institutions and citizens are gathered in the study. The research focus is on social media publications, analysing the content of four European Parliament's social media accounts in Latvian during the period from 1 July 2015 to 31 December 2015. The aim of the research is to identify the potential of the information published on European Parliament's social media accounts in shaping the European citizenship notion among youth in Latvia. The conclusions present clear idea on the frequency of European citizenship topics in the corresponding social media accounts as well as on the amount of feedback and the share of youth involvement in this communication. The results of the study suggest that for now European Parliament's social media publications in Latvian have little potential to develop the notion of European citizenship and there is a need for a well-considered use of social media to assure that the opportunity for two-way communication is fruitfully used.

Keywords: *Democratic participation, European Parliament, European citizenship, social media, youth*

INTRODUCTION

Latvia is a member of the European Union (EU) since 2004 but even in 2016 there was lack of knowledge about the EU issues and the society has low interest about them in general. Youth is the part of society who can gain the most from the EU, but their knowledge about the EU is quite poor as there is no special subject in high school curriculum devoted to the EU history and its current issues. As youth is not reading traditional media, they also lack this information channel as source on the EU matters. At the same time, youth is active on social media, and internet is widely available in Latvia, thus it might be the right channel where the EU institutions can reach youth and improve their knowledge and interest about the EU.

Researchers in many countries have devoted their attention to the aspects of institutions communicating with citizens on social media and this issue is developed in scientific publications as well. For example, in the article on social media impact on democracy Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic (2013b) defends the position that social media can be used to enhance youth political participation. *Demos think-tank* has published a study on the use of Facebook and Twitter for political purposes concluding that social media is an important arena for political activism (Bartlett,

Bennett, Birnie, & Wibberley, 2013). A study in Sweden concluded that “using social media for political purposes does have a positive influence on political interest and offline political participation” pointing out that this effect applies especially to youth as they are more frequent users of social media (Holt, Shehata, Stromback, & Ljungberg, 2013). In a recent study of parliaments and their communication on social media, authors observed that use of social media by parliaments is still in its infancy (Leston-Bandeira & Bender, 2013), however, they suggested that there are signs that promise improvement in the future. The study about social media and civic engagement in Malaysia concluded that “social media have the potential and the ability to promote online civic participation” (Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2014). According to Bryer (2013), all studies that have been conducted so far, can be divided into four types: studies of citizen use of social media and networking tools for the purpose of interaction or engagement with government or in political matters; studies of the actual use of social media or networking tools; conceptual studies that identify relevant theoretical constructs to guide future research; and reports on application of the diversity of social media tools with practical recommendations (Bryer, 2013). Nevertheless, Koc-Michalska, Lilleker and Vedel (2016) are considering that there is still a lack of research on the role and effects of the web 2.0. tools “due to the speed of innovation, of the uptake in use, and the relative youth of Web 2.0”.

From theoretical perspective, the reason for institutions to use social media is supported by Manuel Castells who is considering that nowadays public sphere is built around internet networks and institutions should communicate with society also there (Castells, 2008). As Delia Dumitrica is pointing out, youth is gathering information on the internet and they do not evaluate it as critically as information published in traditional media, thus it is crucial to understand what this information consists of (Dumitrica, 2016), therefore from institutions perspective that is an important reason to be present on internet and provide correct information about institution’s values and topical issues. A positive reason for institutions to use social media is provided in the results of Eurobarometer “European Youth in 2016” where it is stated that 46 % of youth in the EU and 52 % of youth in Latvia are believing that “online social networks represent progress for democracy, because they allow everyone to take part in public debate” (Nancy, 2016). Thus, there are good reasons for institutions to participate on social media, but there is still a need for further examination of opportunities of using social media that could be for the benefit of institutions as well as the citizens.

The research, conducted by the author, is the first to use such a method for analysing the content published by a European institution in social media in the Latvian language. Furthermore, the scope of the study is focusing on European citizenship issues and youth which both are not widely covered topics in the context of European institutions and Latvia. The study analyses how the European Parliament (EP) is using social media, how much attention they pay to youth and what amount of feedback they are receiving. The aim of the study is to identify the potential of information published on the EP social media accounts to affect the shaping of the European citizenship notion among youth in Latvia. For the purpose

of the study, European citizenship is analysed from three aspects: sense of belonging, rights of citizens and citizen participation. Those three aspects were proposed by Richard Bellamy as pillars that make European citizenship (Bellamy, 2008), and this study is following his suggestions on values that are related to each of those aspects.

1. NOTION OF EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP

The concept of European citizenship was officially established with the Treaty of Maastricht on the European Union, stating that it is “over and above national citizenship” and guarantees several new rights to the citizens of the EU, such as the right to live in any of the member states; the right to vote and stand as a candidate for the EP and municipal elections; and the right to petition the EP (EU Publications Office, 2010). According to Eurobarometer 430, 87 % of Europeans in 2015 were familiar with the term “citizen of the European Union”. In Latvia, 82 % of citizens are familiar with this term, but only 28 % of citizens know what this term means (European Union, 2016). This lack of knowledge can be explained by several reasons, one of them being public avoidance to use European citizenship as a term in general. When speaking about values that are represented by European citizenship, they are seen as separate units. Nevertheless, they are recognised as positive aspects of the EU, and in Latvia the sense of belonging to the EU is higher than the EU average – in 2015, the EU average was 51 % of citizens, but in Latvia it was 65 % (Directorate-General for Communication, 2015). Thus, citizens are familiar with their rights and they recognise Latvia’s participation in the EU, but they are not eager to see those values under the term of European citizenship. Perhaps Latvian society is not ready to understand the difference between national and European citizenship and is seeing it as a threat to the national citizenship. However, there is no real reason for such attitude, as European citizenship has a derivative nature, as it cannot be gained without having Member State citizenship, as well as a complementary nature and “is not meant to replace national citizenship” (Besson & Utzinger, 2008).

Surely, citizenship is a complex concept, and to analyse it, a more detailed breakdown is needed. Richard Bellamy suggests viewing citizenship from three aspects: a sense of belonging, rights of citizens; and citizen participation (Bellamy, 2008). Those aspects are also used in this study for analysing the notion of European citizenship. Rights of citizens are granted by the EU treaties, thus, from all three aspects, that is the most self-evident aspect. If the rights are violated, citizens can go to court and, according to Samantha Besson and André Utzinger, active case-law by the European Court of Justice is one of the reasons why European citizenship is developing, and the rights, granted by the EU treaties, are really implemented (Besson & Utzinger, 2008). When speaking about the sense of belonging, it is not enough to declare it by EU treaties as people themselves should be aware of their affiliation. One of the reasons for the low sense of belonging to the EU can also be a lack of information about the EU issues (DG EAC, 2013) where social media can be useful as a tool for

educating and informing people about the EU issues, thus fostering the sense of belonging to the EU. The third aspect, citizen participation, is partly dependent on the first two aspects; if a person is affiliated to the society and knows his rights, he is also more capable of being an active citizen. If there is no sufficient knowledge about the EU and its actual events, citizens are not able to use their rights and opportunities as they simply are not informed about them. Therefore, it is not enough to grant European citizenship by the EU treaties, there is also a need for better communication by the EU institutions, informing citizens about their rights, obligations and opportunities. For the institutions it is important to be able to communicate those values to youth, thus developing their citizenship notion. Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2014) explain this necessity for communication as follows: “The engagement of each new generation of young people with the practices and institutions of democratic governance in a society is an essential means by which such a political system retains its legitimacy” (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014). Social media might be the channel that could provide a direct link between the EU institutions and citizens. To understand what the communication possibilities are, we need to ascertain the current situation with EU institutions and their activities in social media.

2. EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS, CITIZENS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a part of Web 2.0 or second generation internet where technical possibilities allow users to interact with each other much more than it was before. There are several options provided by social media that can be useful for content creators, helping to attract attention and encouraging feedback. The most valuable feature is the possibility of a direct, two-way communication between the content creator and the user. In the context of European institutions, social media is providing the possibility to reach European citizens wherever they are living, and, what is equally important, to do that without any intermediators like it is in traditional media where journalists or editors can decide what information will be delivered to the audience. Several options for interaction are ensuring that communication can be two-way, such as “like” buttons or commentary sections under each post, and the possibility to make a small survey directly in the post. Users can also write direct messages to content creators. Another useful feature of the social media is the possibility to share content between users, so the information published by one content creator can reach a wide audience. If the content is interesting to users, it can travel very fast and reach people who are not direct followers of the content creator. The third favourable feature of the social media is the possibility to use visual material, such as photography, video and infographics, which can help to attract the attention and tell the story easily and successfully. Of course, it is up to the content creator if all those features are reasonably used and the opportunities provided by social media are exercised.

After the USA elections 2008 that popularised the use of internet in political marketing, the European Parliament made social media accounts for the EP 2009 elections campaign (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013a). Since then, the use of social media by European institutions has widely developed. More than 15 European institutions

and agencies are using social media, as well as members of the EP and other EU representatives have their personal social media accounts. European institutions are represented in more than 10 different social media platforms, and many institutions are having several accounts, thus, in total there could be a few thousands of accounts (European Commission, 2016). In the Latvian language, European institutions are represented on social media by European Parliament with four accounts and by European Commission with one account. Three social media accounts maintained by European Union House are partly connected with European institutions, as well as social media accounts of Europe Direct information centres and the EU information points. Social media are also used by national agencies that are coordinating the EU funds in Latvia; in this case, Agency for International Programs for Youth that is maintaining three social media accounts is a good example. If the number of accounts is evaluated, citizens definitely have possibilities to receive information from European institutions on social media. In the case of accounts in English, it is even doubtful if a single person can process all the information that is published there.

Internet access rates and habits of internet usage suggest that there is a potential for European institutions to reach citizens on social media, especially youth. According to Eurostat database “Youth in the digital age”, in the last few years the rate of youth participation in social networks has grown. In 2011, the EU average was 75 %, and in 2015 the participation in social networks reached 84 %. In Latvia, the rate is even higher but without growth, holding on 91 to 93 percentages for the last five years (Eurostat, 2016). One of the reasons for this high participation rate in Latvia is the good internet access rate and fast average speed of internet that is fostering the use of social media and internet in general. In 2015, of all Latvian households that have at least one child, 93.6 % households had access to internet (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2016). This means that there are good conditions to connect on social media as European institutions are using them extensively and youth in Latvia have easy access to internet and social media. The challenge for the European institutions is to provide the content that attracts youth, as entertainment and communication with friends remain the main purpose of social media, rather than learning or interacting with institutions and public officials. In the study of youth civic engagement in the USA, Germany and Britain James Sloam (2012) concludes that youth civic engagement is growing, but it is taking other forms of participation than voting, for example, participation in the protests, and politicians are not able to keep up with youth civic engagement interests (Sloam, 2012). To engage with youth on social media traditional communication style is not enough. As Lusoli, Ward and Gibson (2006) are pointing out “it will require a demonstration that their participation and communication is valued and listened to” as well as “the dialogue needs to be ongoing, considerably less top-down and less formalised”. Likewise, the study of social media in the Italian public sector concluded that there is a need for “more tangible and actual two-way symmetrical communication” as citizens believe that “public institutions are managing their Facebook Pages in a way that is far from fulfilling the expectations of their fans” (Lovari, & Parisi, 2015). Thus, from the institutions, a well-considered communication strategy is needed to address youth and stick out in the overall flow

of information. Some possible strategies are represented in the study that follows online communication of the EP members, highlighting three types of communication: homestyle, impression management and participatory strategy. They found out that predominant strategy used by the EP members was “a service oriented informational homestyle”, however suggesting that in the future participatory communication strategy might get exercised more often (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). In the study of the European Parliament’s Facebook feed before 2009 elections, Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic suggested that their social media entries can be grouped into four clusters: persuasive posts; explicative posts; entertaining posts; and informative posts (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). Moreno *et al.* (2015) have compiled recommendations from several studies on how to better communicate with the audience on social media, which are as follows: to engage in direct and open conversation, addressing the needs, concerns, and interests of public; to provide an easy-to-use interface for their stakeholders; keep visitors on the site; encourage users to return; engage in dialogic communication; to establish clear rules to encourage and facilitate participation; and to balance between participation involving openness and community and effectiveness in representing organizational objectives (Moreno *et al.*, 2015).

When following European institutions on social media, one can get a quite satisfactory first impression about communication tactics, main topics and feedback level. However, we can only speak about the potential impact of those messages when it is possible to see those everyday actions as a part of a bigger picture. For this purpose, long-term social media content analysis is needed. Later, using results of this analysis, we can statistically identify the real situation: the share of certain topics, average feedback results and reasons to use one or other communication style. Those results can be used either for academic purpose or by institutions to level up their results of social media communication. In the research on the EP social media Latvian accounts, the author is suggesting a method for analysing social media content and measuring its potential impact.

3. METHODS AND PROCEDURE OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In this study, latest publications and literature is analysed to summarise the current academic views on the topics about European citizenship, democratic participation and the use of social media. Social media content published by the EP is analysed in the research. For the purpose of the study, the focus is only on those accounts where content is published in the Latvian language. There are four such accounts: two on *Twitter.com* (twitter.com/EP_Riga and twitter.com/Euoparl_LV), one on *Facebook.com* ([Facebook.com/Eiroparlaments](https://www.facebook.com/Eiroparlaments)) and one on local Latvian social network *Draugiem.lv* (draugiem.lv/euoparl). The period of the analysis is six months – from the beginning of July 2015 until the end of December 2015. In this period 1348 entries were analysed: 261 from *Facebook1*; 206 from *Draugiem1*; 401 from *Twitter1*; and 480 from *Twitter2*. Social media content was analysed according to more than 70 different indicators and sub-indicators which were divided into three large groups: content indicators; message indicators; and feedback indicators (Table 1).

Table 1. Indicators and Sub-indicators Analysed in the European Parliament's Social Media Entries from 1 July to 31 December 2015

	Indicators	Sub-indicators
Content indicators	Use of visual material	Picture; infographic; video material; animation; poster; illustration; entry where visual material is not used
	Link to external material	Link to online page; link to other social media; link to online mass media; link to some other content, that is not identified in previous sub-indicators
	Use of tagging	Institution; non-governmental organisation; public establishment; public official; person; entrepreneur; mass media; community; social media profile related to youth
Message indicators	Sense of belonging	European Citizenship; history of the EU; news about the EU; information about the EU institutions and their representatives; the EU represented as a single entity; representation of Latvia as an active Member State of the EU
	Rights of citizens	Non-discrimination; freedom of speech; right to participate in the EP elections; entries that are related to the four freedoms of European citizens
	Citizen participation	Voting in the EP elections; participation in the contest organised by the EU institution; applying for the job or trainee position in the EU institution; use of the EU funding; participation in the event organised by the EU institution
	Call for action	Answer a question or write commentaries about some topic; forward the message to followers; follow the link that is published in the entry
	Representation of topics about youth	Entries about youth; entries about youth organisations and public youth establishments; entries that are directly addressing youth
Feedback indicators	Liking	Likes (total amount); likes by youth; likes by unrecognisable social media users
	Sharing	Share (total amount); share by youth; share by unrecognisable social media users
	Use of commentary section	Commentary (total amount); commentary by youth; commentary by unrecognisable social media users
	Content of commentary section	Type of the commentary: question, answer, opinion; attitude of the commentaries: supportive, negative or neutral

To assure that the youth feedback is distinguishable, several criteria were developed helping to recognise youth on social media and separate them from other social media users. The criteria were evaluated in the sequence of reliability, where the first one is information that is written in the person's social media profile, for example, age, school or workplace. The second criterion is information that the person is publishing in his/her social media entries and the information that is shared with his/her followers. The third criterion is the person's profile photography and other pictures that are available in his/her social media page. However, keeping

in mind social media privacy options and the possibility to have a fake or an inaccurate account, the study separates the activities performed by youth from the activities performed by users that might be youth but their identity cannot be proven according to verified criteria.

4. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The data were collected in April and May 2016, thus data, representing the study period, gave the results that were observable in that time. The data collected in any other period, for example, December 2015 or September 2016, might give slightly different results as social media were still developing, users could opt out at any time and the content might be changed or even deleted by its publishers. SPSS Statistics was used for data analysis, ensuring the possibility to identify the overall situation for each indicator and providing the opportunity to represent the correlation between different indicators, for example, which topics are generating more feedback or can tagging ensure a larger reach of audience.

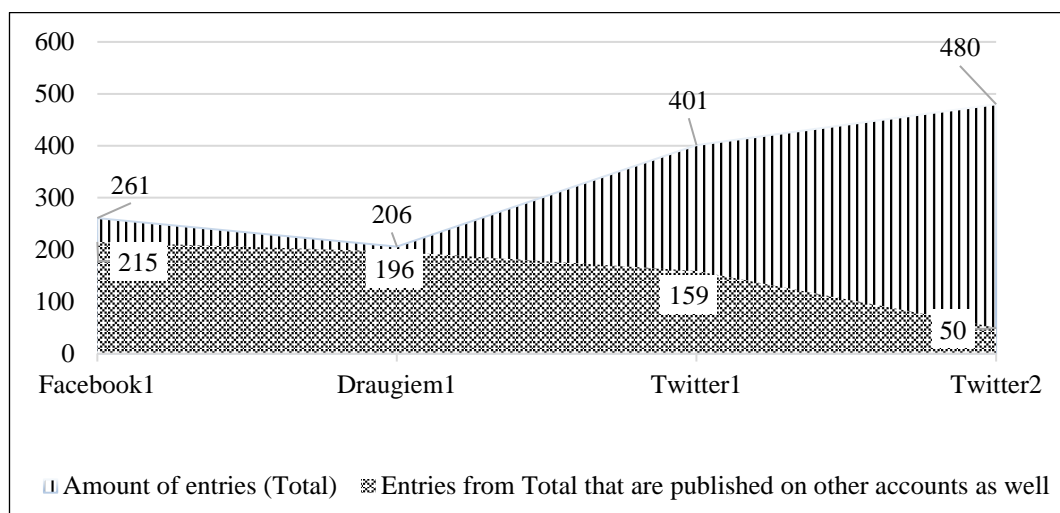


Fig. 1. European Parliament's social media entries from 1 July to 31 December 2015. Total amount of entries by each social media account and share of entries that are also published on other analysed accounts.

The results of the study suggest that the EP is not successfully exploiting all the possibilities that social media can provide for communication with society. 50 % of entries on *Twitter1* are without any visual material and they are receiving less feedback from users. Out of 1348 entries only in 54 cases users are directly asked to give a feedback in the form of commentary. Altogether, there are 348 commentaries received, and 44 % of them are with a negative connotation. Furthermore, the EP is not always responding to the questions in the commentary sections, which is, in particular, the case with the *Twitter2* account.

Unreasoned attitude from the content creators is seen when the content from all analysed accounts is compared. The same or very similar information is

published, often on the same day or with a few days gap, in several of the analysed accounts. As seen in Fig. 1, in the case of *Draugiem1* 95 % all entries are similar to those published on other accounts. The situation is slightly better with *Facebook1* where 82 % of entries are repeated from another account. The highest amount of original content is on the *Twitter2* account where only 10 % of entries are also published in at least one of other analysed accounts. By not making original content for each account, the European Parliament is not respecting technical differences and opportunities of social media platforms and the possibility that for each account there might be followers with different demographics and interests, thus there is a missed opportunity to make content that fits better to each social media platform and attracts attention of those particular followers.

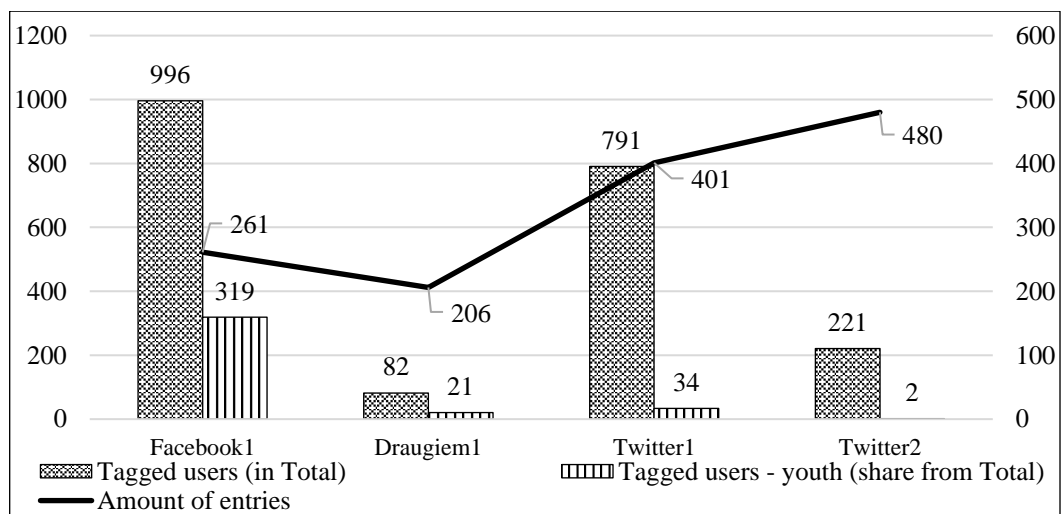


Fig. 2. European Parliament's social media entries from 1 July to 31 December 2015. Total amount of tagged users by each social media account and tagged users that are connected with youth (share from Total).

From all the technical opportunities that social media are providing, the EP most actively is using tagging, which theoretically can provide larger numbers of the audience reached. However, the results of the study indicate that tagging is done chaotically and there is no correlation between the number of tagged users and the feedback received by entries. Figure 2 illustrates the number of tagged users by each social media account, showing the differences between the accounts. The most active use of tagging is in the *Facebook1* and *Twitter1* account where there are several cases with entries that have more than 10 tagged users per entry. The maximum amount is 40 tagged users in one entry; at the same time, there are also entries without tagged users, thus inconsistency is observed and in many cases the reason to tag one or another user is questionable.

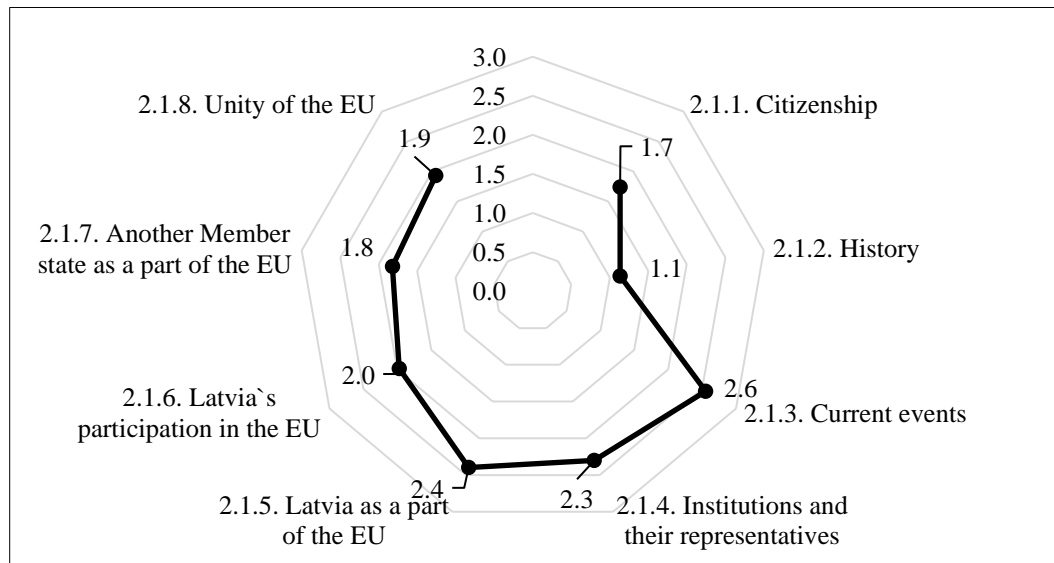


Fig. 3. European Parliaments' *Facebook1* entries from 1 July to 31 December 2015. Entries about topics related to the sense of belonging to the EU and average "likes" from youth received on each topic.

In the 6 months of the study period, more than 80 % of entries are about the EU institutions and their representatives. According to the division of European citizenship aspects that are used in this study, those entries are counted as messages that might affect citizens' sense of belonging. Figure 3 illustrates the sense of belonging entries published on the *Facebook1* account and average "likes" that each topic received from the youth in the analysed period. Most of the "likes" are received by the entries about the EU current events and entries that are showing Latvia as Member State of the EU. At the same time, the results of the study suggest that youth are giving more feedback to the topics about citizen participation than to entries containing topics of "a sense of belonging". For example, most of "likes" from youth on "citizen participation" aspect received the topic about participation in the contests, which had 3.7 "likes" per entry on average.

In general, the other two aspects, rights of citizens and citizen participation, are rarely represented – four to six times less often, depending on the social media account. From the aspect of citizens' rights, the topic used most often is human rights on *Facebook1* and *Twitter2* accounts and single market topic on *Draugiem1* and *Twitter1*. From the aspect of citizen participation, the topic used most often is "participation in the contests" which is represented in 59 *Facebook1* and 57 *Draugiem1* entries, as well as highlighting citizens' rights as an opportunity in 47 *Twitter1* entries and information about events and online broadcasts in 61 of *Twitter2* account entries. Nevertheless, this disproportion and the results of the study suggest that the EP is publishing information that is topical at a given moment but not much attention is given to the use of social media as a source for educating citizens about the EU issues in wider perspective.

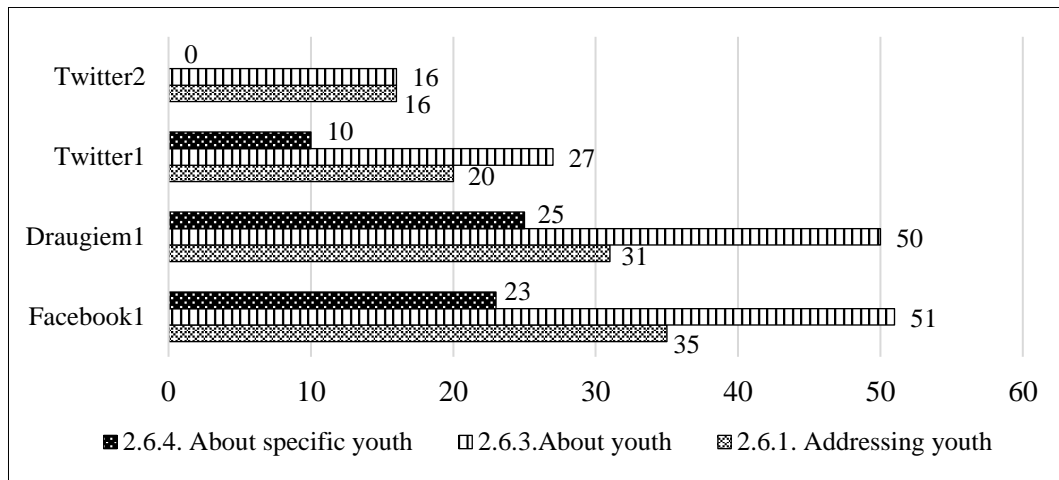


Fig. 4. European Parliament's social media accounts from 1 July to 31 December 2015. The number of entries that are about youth or are addressing youth directly.

The results of the study suggest that the EP acknowledges youth as audience. Figure 4 demonstrates the number of entries that are about youth on each of social media accounts analysed. On *Draugiem1* 24 % of entries are about youth, likewise, on *Facebook1* youth is represented – 1/5 of all entries are about youth and 32 % of all tagged users are related youth. Although there is no strong correlation between tagging youth in the entries and receiving more feedback from youth, for now, *Facebook.com* seems to be the best channel for the EP to reach youth in Latvia, as entries published on *Facebook1* receive more feedback from youth in general.

CONCLUSION

According to the results of the study, the EP is using social media quite actively and on the one hand, it can be a good example of institution's presence in the digital age, but, on the other hand, the content that was analysed suggests that social media is used without well-considered communication strategy. Technical possibilities of social media are not successfully exercised, shaping the EP social media accounts just as one more channel for top-down one-way communication. Those problems are similar to the ones recognised by other studies which are analysing how institutions are communicating on social media, therefore the results of this research are supplementing the argumentation that institutions should pay more attention to their activities on social media if they want to get successful communication outcomes and not just being present on social media to demonstrate that they theoretically care about citizens and their opinion.

The EP social media topics that are represented in the posts provide an incomplete notion about the European Union, its values and citizens' rights and opportunities. For the citizens who are following those social media accounts, it can be a source of topical information but that can be also done by traditional media and web pages. Thus, for the EP social media is still an unused potential for two-way communication and production of content which for its followers might

develop a better sense of belonging to the EU and knowledge about the rights and possibilities of the EU citizens. European Parliament's publications on social media have little potential to reach youth, construct their notion of the European Citizenship and stimulate participation.

There are several conditions that make the study of social media content complicated, for example, the content is inconstant and can be changed by its producers or social media owners. This research of the EP social media content is not an exception, nevertheless, its results provide the notion and overview of a six-months period which is the minimal time to develop first conclusions about the effectiveness of the use of social media by institutions. There is a need for a similar long-term study that could provide more information about the patterns of communication between citizens and institutions on social media, thus giving material that can help to develop better communication strategies for the future. That could be especially useful in Latvia where the community is relatively small and its access to internet is relatively high, thereby social media might be fruitfully used for two-way communication between the citizens and institutions.

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