Contradictory tendencies in the political culture of Croatian youth: unexpected anomalies or an expected answer to the social crisis?

Vlasta Ilišin, Anja Gvozdanović and Dunja Potočnik

Institute for Social Research, Zagreb, Croatia

ABSTRACT
A successful democratic consolidation of post-socialist societies depends, among other things, on their citizens’ political culture, younger generations included. Moreover, youth civic engagement today and in the future is a guarantee of the continuity and development of democracy, which means that scientists need to gain insight into young people’s political culture. In this paper we look at political values, institutional trust and participation as relevant components of the civic political culture. The analysis is based on quantitative data collected in the empirical studies of Croatian youth, carried out between 1999 and 2013. Based on longitudinal study results, a downward trend is identified regarding selected political culture indicators: acceptance of liberal-democratic values, trust in social and political institutions, interest in politics and party preference. However, there is a simultaneous increase in participation in various types of organizations, especially political parties. The interpretation of established tendencies is placed in a broader context of an inherited democratic deficit, economic recession and social crisis. Current trends are both indicators and consequences of young people’s inadequate political socialization as well as weaknesses of political institutions and various actors during the transition and consolidation period.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 17 October 2015
Accepted 13 June 2017

KEYWORDS
The youth; political culture; democratic deficit; social crisis; Croatia

Introduction
The successful functioning and development of a democratic system and democracy in general largely depends on the spread and acceptance of participant democratic political culture among the citizens. This implies both cognitive and behavioral dimensions which refer to deeply rooted democratic values and attitudes and high levels of political participation. Studies of political culture are particularly relevant in the post-socialist countries which have a brief democratic tradition, such as Croatia. Experience has already shown that the normative and institutional establishment of a pluralistic society and a democratic political order is not sufficient enough to overcome the democratic deficit with which these societies are faced. The process of democracy has to be supported by successful (formal and informal) political socialization and mobilization of citizens, especially
young people, who are present and future carriers of democratic development. In other words, ‘if political culture cannot support the democratic system, the chances for the success of the system are slim’ (Almond and Verba 2000, 365).

Studies of current trends among the youth regarding politics, especially institutional politics, and the appropriate understanding of political culture in this vital segment of population are therefore becoming increasingly important for democracy and its development in all contemporary societies. Political culture is referred to as ‘cognitive, affective and evaluative orientation toward political system in general, its input and output aspects and the individual as a political actor’ (Almond and Verba 2000, 22) which, among other things, includes the relationship of citizens towards political values, institutions and participation. These are the foundations on which three ideal types of political culture are constructed – parochial, subject and participant. However, the authors state that in reality these types are mixed, depending on the (non)compliance of political culture with the political system. For this reason, one can assume that the discrepancy between these two is to be expected especially in societies undergoing profound social and political changes, as is the case with the post-socialist countries in Europe. Therefore, in order to get a better understanding of the features of Croatian youth political culture it is necessary to give a preliminary insight into some relevant aspects of the process of democratic transition and consolidation in Croatia over the last quarter century.

Democratic transformation of Croatia

Although Croatia shares a common totalitarian legacy with other post-socialist countries, characterized by a single-party system and planned economy, it is also different from them. Socialism in this country included self-management, social ownership and some elements of market economy. Those were the elements on which the ‘Yugoslav experiment’ was founded as a historically specific type of political and social modernization (Rusinow 1977). In addition to that, former Yugoslavia was among economically most developed socialist countries and Croatia was, after Slovenia, the most developed republic within the federation. Hence, in the eve of the transition period Croatia had several comparative advantages over most other post-socialist countries. However, those advantages were not well used and today, according to a number of overall social development indicators, Croatia is at the bottom of the list in comparison to other EU countries, including the new member states.

One of the main reasons for the unsatisfactory economic, political and democratic transformation of the Croatian society is the experience of war (1991-1995) which was fought on the Croatian territory. The society’s transition to democracy was happening along with the process of establishing a sovereign and independent state. The new political system was normatively founded on liberal and democratic principles which proclaimed market economy, political pluralism, tolerance and protection of human and minority rights. The turbulent first decade of transition (1990-1999) largely defined the direction and pace of changes which deviated from proclaimed principles. That period was primarily marked by the establishment of an ethnically homogenous state with the dominant concept of national integration and restoration of traditional values. That ideological framework was accompanied by deficient democratic practices. Namely, the development of the institutionally implemented multi-party system was largely limited by a
decade of one-party rule\textsuperscript{2} and its president as the head of state whose leadership style was authoritarian and clientelistic (Lalović 2000; Kasapović 2001; Zakošek 2002; Čular 2004). The war environment and the ruling party created an atmosphere in which there was no sufficient protection of human rights, no legal sanctions for war crimes and profiteering, not enough media freedom. Political pluralism was considered disturbing for the unity of nation. At the same time, in the midst of war, the ownership transformation and the economic restructuring were carried out in a way that allowed widespread abuse. The ravages of war and the privatization process in Croatia were initial reasons for the economic setback which resulted in the disappearance of former social security, mass job losses, decline in living standards of the majority and the deepening of social inequalities (Županov 1995, 2002).

The period of democratic consolidation started in 2000 after the second consecutive peaceful change of government. The following decade was marked by Croatian endeavors to join the European Union, which did not happen until 2013. The economic crisis which started at the end of the second decade of transition has been going on for the last seven years. It burdens today’s Croatia with economic recession and social crisis, rising unemployment and pauperization of a large number of citizens. In this context, young people are particularly affected by the crisis and their social integration and acceptance of permanent social roles is additionally slowed down (Ilišin et al. 2013). Along with economic troubles, there is a noticeable destabilization of the political scene. Ideological antagonisms which date back to World War II are revived and political divisions are intensified, fueled by different ideologies rather than pressing social issues. Current social and political confrontations show that after the state of social anomie during the 1990s (Županov 1995), an undisputed consensus on basic social values has not been reached yet. Thus, the process of democratic consolidation is carried out at a slow pace which suggests that the democratization of Croatia in the period of adjustment to the EU requirements was extorted, rather than truly accomplished in reality. The outlined characteristics of the democratic transition are the framework in which political socialization of the young people in Croatia has taken place.

**Young people and politics in contemporary societies**

Young people in Croatia and their peers in other counties share a similar attitude to politics.\textsuperscript{3} It is well known that young people’s attitude towards politics is a highly dynamic and a very specific process; in general, citizens’ relationships to politics are influenced by the dynamics of socio-historical contexts and specificities of particular societies (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Esser and De Vreese 2007; Sloam 2012, 2013). Still, there are some relatively permanent tendencies present in the majority of contemporary societies. One of them are low levels of youth political participation (compared to adults), especially in institutional politics (formal, traditional, conventional). The last decade, however, has shown decreasing levels of political participation among general population as well (Norris 2003; Forbrig 2005; Henn, Weinstein, and Forrest 2005; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Fahmy 2006; Quintelier 2007; Marien, Hooghe, and Quintelier 2010; Sander and Putnam 2010). Indicators of these downward trends in citizens’ political participation (especially young citizens) are a continuous decrease in voter turnout and political party membership in contemporary societies (Gallagher and Marsh 2004; Pedersen et al.
2004; Edwards 2007; Esser and De Vreese 2007; Wass 2007; Cross and Young 2008a, 2008b; Bruter and Harrison 2009; Davies et al. 2009; Kestilä-Kekkonen 2009; Henn and Foard 2014). Other indicators regarding young people also point to their lack of interest in politics, low levels of political knowledge, weak political party identification and, in some cases, lack of trust in political institutions and actors (Kimberlee 2002; Forbrig 2005; Fahmy 2006; Henn, Weinstein, and Hodgkinson 2007; Sloam 2007; Dalton 2011; Henn and Foard 2014). Other indicators regarding young people also point to their lack of interest in politics, low levels of political knowledge, weak political party identification and, in some cases, lack of trust in political institutions and actors (Kimberlee 2002; Forbrig 2005; Fahmy 2006; Henn, Weinstein, and Hodgkinson 2007; Sloam 2007; Dalton 2011; Henn and Foard 2014).4

All data that persistently point to lower levels of youth participation in traditional politics (compared to adults and previous younger generations) raise the question: why this minimal participation in formal politics? There are multiple reasons: widespread social changes (a framework for understanding political changes), changes in the youth socialization process, political institutions and their functioning (especially their sensitivity to young people’s interests and needs). Given that young people’s attitude to politics has considerably changed over the last couple of decades (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Benedicto 2013), it is argued that the rise of post-materialist values (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), more differentiated lifestyles and identities, including political identity (Rossi 2009; Benedicto 2013). Youth socialization patterns are characterized by the declining influence of traditional institutions as socialization agents (Youniss and Levine 2009; Flanagan et al. 2012). In addition, young people are distancing themselves from institutional politics because they believe that political actors are not sufficiently focused on youth-related issues (Forbrig 2005; Henn, Weinstein, and Forrest 2005; Marsh, O’Toole, and Jones 2007; Sloam 2007, Farthing 2012, Henn and Foard 2014). The usual answer to the question whether young people are politically apathetic or alienated is that they are politically alienated from traditional politics, not from political activity in general (Norris 2003; Marsh, O’Toole, and Jones 2007; Farthing 2010; Harris, Win, and Younes 2010; Dalton 2011; Benedicto 2013). In short, the political alienation thesis implies the youth’s disappointment in politics and their critical stance towards institutional politics whose agenda does not include youth issues. Still, young people approve of democracy which has to be modernized and more responsive to everyone’s needs.

It has already been indicated that young people’s insufficient engagement in conventional politics can be explained by the so-called new youth politics, i.e. social engagement which is a substitute for institutional political engagement. Young people today have a different understanding of politics and therefore researchers need to move away from a traditional paradigm and introduce new approaches to politics (Forbrig 2005; Marsh, O’Toole, and Jones 2007; Sloam 2007, 2012; Youniss and Levine 2009; Dalton 2011; Benedicto 2013). Non-institutional political activities (such as demonstrations, boycotts and petitions) are much preferred nowadays, as well as voluntary and humanitarian work and participation in civil society organizations which are concerned with local and global social problems (Norris 2003, Flanagan et al. 2005; Queniart 2008; Quintelier 2008; Youniss and Levine 2009; Flanagan and Levine 2010; Marzana, Marta, and Pozzi 2012). This broad spectrum of social engagement with political overtones has recently been complemented by activities on social networks, which is a platform for the expansion of youth political participation (Bennett 2008; Quintelier and Vissers 2008; Farthing 2010). However, alternative forms of participation are more influenced by socio-economic differences than the conventional ones; therefore, deepening social inequalities might generate
more pronounced inequalities in the political participation of European citizens (Marien, Hooghe, and Quintelier 2010; Stolle and Hooghe 2011; Sloam 2013). Still, findings which show that young people haven’t given up completely on political institutions and they often combine them with alternative forms of political engagement are very encouraging (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Cross and Young 2008b; Bruter and Harrison 2009; Harris, Win, and Younes 2010; Hustinx et al. 2012; Sloam 2013; Henn and Foard 2014). The importance of such participation pluralism comes from the awareness that new types of political engagement cannot fully compensate for the decline in classical forms of political activism, necessary for the maintenance and development of representative democracy. So, only the combination of conventional and unconventional political activities can bring the necessary changes to ossified political programs, institutions and processes. Stronger tendencies of the youth towards alternative political engagement are an important contribution to redefining the traditional political agenda today and in the future. In other words, young people’s political contribution is one way of directing formal politics towards greater responsiveness to citizens’ needs and interests. Also, it can be assumed that today’s young people will carry their adopted patterns of political behavior into adulthood.

**Methodological considerations**

In order to investigate the basic characteristics and tendencies of youth political culture in contemporary Croatia, political values, institutional trust and participation are analysed. Descriptive analysis uses the data obtained from three representative youth surveys (respondents 15–29 years of age) that were conducted in 1999 (N = 1700), 2004 (N = 2000) and 2013 (N = 2000). Comparative analysis uses longitudinal monitoring of some indicators on the basis of response distribution regarding the dynamics, extent and direction of changes that occurred in Croatian youth political culture within the given time frame.

Bearing in mind young people’s current attitudes to politics, the specific experience of transition and the social crisis in Croatia today, contradictory changes and tendencies are expected in youth political culture, some of its elements getting stronger, others weaker. Therefore, we are in search of answers to three questions: What is the political culture of Croatian youth like today and what are its dominant characteristics? What are the direction and extent of changes in the youth political culture in Croatia? Are the established changes in the observed dimensions of political culture mutually complementary? The analysis predominantly focuses on indicators of institutional political engagement of youth because of corresponding research data at our disposal and which point to very indicative trends.

**Political values and trust**

Understanding youth political culture necessarily requires insight into young people’s political values which are an indicator of their general support for the system. Democratic systems are founded on liberal and democratic values which were incorporated in the Croatian Constitution (Article 3) in 1990 as the highest values of the constitutional order. Figure 1 shows the highest degree of acceptance of values because it represents
fundamental constitutional principles and a broad social consensus is expected without any relativization or controversy.

Several trends are evident from the given data. Firstly, fundamental liberal and democratic values are highly acceptable to young citizens, in agreement with the authors of the Constitution. Secondly, the highest degree of acceptance changed and was the lowest in the most recent study. In other words, it declined after the experience of living in a nominally democratic system and during the time of social crisis. The third important trend was a linear decline in the importance of democratic and multi-party system over 14 years. In 2013 this value was no longer considered very important by the majority of respondents.

These data can be related to some other findings from 2013. Besides 36% of undecided respondents, 37% of young people thought that strong leaders could best overcome difficulties in the functioning of democracy while only 27% believed that democracy was

**Figure 1.** Comparison of acceptance of constitutional values—degree very important (%).
always the best solution. 40% of young people were satisfied with the state of democracy in the country and 58% were dissatisfied.

This worrying picture of the democratic potential of Croatian youth is completed with comparative findings on their institutional (dis)trust (Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, institutional trust weakened between 2004 and 2013. The biggest losers were the Croatian Parliament, the Croatian Government, television and religious institutions. While the first survey showed that political parties were perceived as untrustworthy by the majority of respondents, in the latest survey that perception extended to government institutions at both local and national levels and to television and press. Also, in 2013 institutional trust was relatively low because not one institution gained the trust of more than one third of all young respondents.8 The bottom of the trust scale was occupied by the highest representative and executive bodies of the Government and political parties, continuously the least trusted. Indeed, with political trust so poor and distrust so apparently dominant, one can speak of widespread aversion towards these political actors.9

The comparative research results clearly indicate a downward trend in the support for liberal and democratic values and trust in social and political institutions. At the same time, there is a higher support for authoritarian than democratic form of government and a great dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in Croatia. If all these tendencies are observed together, we come to the conclusion that, among young people, the general support for the existing political system is weakening. These data contradict expectations that young people, socialized in a democratic system, will strongly support it. It is therefore fair to assume that unsatisfactory functioning of political institutions and actors and young people’s dissatisfaction with them are responsible for this erosion of support.

**Political participation**

Looking at findings on the decline in support for the democratic political system and especially pronounced decline in institutional trust, it would be safe to assume that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completely or mostly trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely or mostly do not trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Army</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Religious institutions/Church</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. President of the Republic</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Police</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Civil society organizations</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Radio* / Internet portals</td>
<td>44.9*</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Public services</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Press</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. TV</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Unions</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Local authorities</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Judiciary</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Large companies</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Croatian Government</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Croatian Parliament</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Political parties</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
youth participation is also on the decline. Comparative data on youth interest in politics (Figure 2) are partially compliant with this hypothesis. Interest in politics is a pre-condition for active political participation.

Youth interest in politics fluctuated in the observed time period. While the number of young people very interested in politics remained steadily low, in the last decade there was a dramatic increase in the number of those completely uninterested in politics.10

Having those figures in mind, one would expect a decline in political participation as well. However, comparative data in Table 2 indicate the opposite trend.

The number of young people who became members of various organizations increased by 20% in the period between two last surveys, with some respondents being members of more than one organization. In other words, youth participation increased in both political parties and organizations of civil society. It can be concluded that the number of ‘civic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sports club and groups</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Political party</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Volunteer organization</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Culture or art group</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Youth organization</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Religious organization</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Humanitarian organization</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Union</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Human rights organization</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Environmental organization</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Peace organization</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Other organization</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Workers rights organization</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not members of any organization</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Comparison of interest in politics (%).
omnivores’, those who combine different forms of civic engagement, is on the rise (Hustinx et al. 2012).

The distribution of membership in civil society organizations shows that young people are mostly interested in sport, as can be expected. A relatively pronounced increase in participation in voluntary organizations and youth organizations points to the need of young people to solve specific or concrete problems for which political institutions and actors do not demonstrate enough political will or capacity. The lack of interest for global problems among the youth can probably be explained by the fact these issues are already on some political parties’ agendas.

The most intriguing data on youth membership in various organizations are those about the recent rise in political party membership, given the fact that it coincided with the trust in political parties at its lowest. It points to a provocative anomaly: there are twice as many young members in political parties as those who trust these political institutions. In order to explain this contradiction, the focus should be on political parties as unavoidable actors in multi-party system and society democratization. It is worth noticing that along with the rise in young people’s party membership from 1999 to 2013, the number of those who did not declare their party preference rose as well (from 34% to 45%). It would seem that Croatian youth are divided in two groups: young people with no interest whatsoever in political parties and, consequently, elections, and young people who support certain parties and almost one fifth of them decide to join them.

The initial motivation to join political parties is mostly related to a pronounced interest in politics and trust in party efficiency (Cross and Young 2008b). There are also other types of motivation: collective, altruistic, purposeful, aiming to serve the public interest or material and selective, focused on gaining individual benefits (Bruter and Harrison 2009). The discrepancy between the decline in political trust and increase in party membership raises the question about the motivation of young people in Croatia for their political engagement. The obtained results are in line with a three-dimensional model of youth party membership (Bruter and Harrison 2009). These authors identified morally oriented members (the most numerous), inspired by ideological and altruistic motives; less numerous are professionally oriented members motivated by materialist, professional or instrumental reasons; the fewest members are socially oriented, moved by the need for group integration, meeting people and making new friends. Similar motives could be identified among the Croatian youth in 2013 (Figure 3).

In Croatia there are mixed motives for youth membership in various organizations (not just political parties). The respondents were given different reasons/motives for becoming a member of an organization and they could also decide how important they were to them. It is not surprising that the predominant type of motivation was altruistic, focused on serving public interest and social motivation was also expectedly strong. The fact that instrumental motivation, i.e. realization of individual needs and interests, was chosen by one fifth of young people suggests that orientation towards personal benefits is not reserved only for members of political parties but also those who join various civil society organizations. In this context, it is useful to look at the actors who young people recognize as capable of motivating them for bigger social engagement (Figure 4).

Young people put the motivation potential of their families and friends in the first place while political parties and famous public persons come at the bottom of the scale, which is to be expected after findings on social and institutional (dis)trust. Also, various internet
platforms are perceived as important whereas the role of television is weakening. Almost every second young respondent thinks that their peers could be motivated by the education system although this is a controversial issue in Croatia today. It is certainly intriguing that various civil society organizations, except generation-based youth organizations, are perceived as having only a slightly higher mobilization potential than detestable political parties. It is equally interesting that, having previously chosen family and friends as the least important factor when deciding about group/party membership, young people now see them as the most powerful mobilization force. It would seem that, when making their choice to join different organizations, young people are primarily guided by aims and programs of these organizations, especially if they are complementary to their own interests.

Figure 3. Motivation for joining various organizations – degree very much (%).
Young people’s perception of the factors that contribute to success in Croatian society can shed some more light on the problem of their motivation for social and political engagement (Figure 5). Before we look at the comparative data, it is worth noting that today 80% of young people believe that, besides having good looks and a college degree, it is modern to have a career (Ilišin et al. 2013). This suggests that they want to succeed in life and their efforts include professional affirmation.

Changes in the perception of important social success factors indirectly point to the problems in contemporary Croatian society, possible reasons for citizens’ dissatisfaction and hidden values. Two trends are relevant in the context of our analysis. Firstly, a drastic decline in the importance of professional responsibility and commitment,
honesty and fairness towards others, knowledge and skills, which should be paramount factors in career building. Since young people find these mechanisms of advancement devalued, it is logical that they turn to other options, such as nepotism and corruption. The second important trend is a permanent rise in the perception of corruption and political patronage as very important for social success. More than a quarter of young people hold this worrying view. When we focus on political patronage, it can be said that most young people have recognized the way political parties function: the winner takes it all, the loot is distributed among the most deserving ones, allies are purchased and the position of power retained. Because of such behavioral patterns, these political actors are perceived as available instruments to access increasingly meagre social resources. If political parties provide existential security and social promotion for their

**Figure 5.** Comparison of perception of success factors in Croatian society – degree very important (%).
members, it can be expected they will become more and more attractive to young people who feel dissatisfied and cannot meet their needs or realize their potentials.

These research results make young members of Croatian political parties rather suspect, so it is important to get a deeper insight into their socio-demographic characteristics and possible differences from young non-members, regarding the examined political culture indicators. The results of the bivariate analysis show (level of significance 0.000) that young members of political parties have a relatively recognizable social profile: in a higher than average number of cases they live in rural areas and their fathers completed secondary education. Two thirds finished high school and they declare themselves religious. It should be added that, although there is no statistical significance gender wise, there are 42% of women among party members. On the other hand, it has been established that party membership is well below average among young people who live in Zagreb and whose fathers completed university education. Regarding party membership, the most interesting differences are found among social subgroups of young people, especially when data on trust in political parties are compared. More precisely, 15% of the unemployed are political party members out of which 7% trust political parties; this ratio among the employed is 14%:5%, among university students 11%:4% and high school students 3%:5%. These results lead to the conclusion that the lower social status young people of somewhat weaker socio-cultural competencies are more prone to joining political parties. Also party membership is more attractive to those young people who are ready to enter the labor market or are trying to get a better position on it.

It is also intriguing that members of political parties differ from non-members only sporadically with respect to analyzed dimensions of political culture. There are no statistically significant differences regarding the acceptance of constitutional values, attitudes towards democratic or authoritarian mode of rule, (dis)satisfaction with the state of democracy in Croatia and the perception of success factors in Croatian society. On the other hand, political party members express a bigger interest in politics (although 27% of them claim they have no interest in it), they have a higher than average trust in the government, parliament, local authorities, judiciary system, public services and political parties (trusted by only 14% of party members). Also, they often mention moral and altruistic motives for joining their organizations (collective work for social well-being and participation in decision making) and recognize political parties as mobilization factors. In short, young members of political parties differ from non-members in expected ways but only to a small extent. Some expected differences are missing, e.g. a stronger acceptance of liberal and democratic values and a higher level of support for the democratic system; other existing differences are relatively weak. In this context it is worth mentioning again that 86% of party members express distrust in political parties. It can therefore be assumed that young people trust only parties they belong to while most other parties are perceived as political enemies, unworthy of trust and without credibility, rather than legitimate opponents in the political arena.

From these findings it follows that young party members differ from non-members primarily with regard to participation while differences in terms of commitment to the democratic system and its values are poorly expressed. The fact is that almost all young people regard corruption as unacceptable and 80% of them think that the fight against corruption is a political priority of the Croatian Government (Ilišin 2007a; Ilišin et al. 2013). But, since a considerable number of young people show readiness to join political parties even though
they do not trust them or the system, it would seem that they are either unaware of the fact that clientelism is a form of political corruption or purposefully neglect it. To put it bluntly, that is the price they are willing to pay for personal benefit without pondering too much over ethical dilemmas. This kind of approach to political participation is additionally problematic because it generates a negative selection in the process of recruiting young people into political parties in Croatia.

Conclusions

Research findings can be summarized in the following conclusions. Firstly, youth political culture in contemporary Croatia can be characterized as democratic political culture with a number of elements of subject political culture. Secondly, the current trends affect the general support for the democratic political system and youth participation in various organizations. Thirdly, the detected changes are controversial and occur to an unequal extent.

Democratic components of youth political culture can be recognized in highly accepted constitutional (liberal and democratic) values and a relatively high level of participation in political parties and civil society organizations. However, a recent increase in youth political participation indicates the strengthening of subject political culture. Study results confirm that detected changes are not mutually complementary and therefore partly deviate from theoretical expectations. On the one hand, despite growing up in democracy, young people’s support for the system has weakened. This can be seen from a slight decline in an unconditional acceptance of liberal and democratic constitutional values (especially democratic and multi-party system) and the erosion of institutional trust. Instead, more young people opt for the authoritarian form of rule and express their dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in the country. On the other hand, in spite of all that, youth participation in various organizations and especially political parties has gone up.

Findings that confirm these contradictory trends show that there are two times more political party members than those who trust these organizations. This discrepancy calls into question the motivation of young people to join political parties, especially because of intra-party democracy deficits and excessive clientelism. Therefore, political parties can be and often are primarily perceived as means of securing jobs and social advancement.

That implies submission to party leaders which certainly favors the development of subject political culture and keeps career-motivated recruitment of new members alive. For the time being, there are weak signals that Croatian political parties are capable of developing the mechanisms of intra-party democracy or giving up patronage practices, thus moving to clearly profiled political organizations which should attract more altruistic members. Widespread clientelistic recruitment practices of political parties are problematic because today’s young members are tomorrow’s political elite. It can be safely assumed that the same patterns related to subject political culture might continue in the near future.

Detected deviations from expected changes in youth political culture require the explanation of current trends. Here we argue that multiple reasons are to be found in the interaction of the social and political legacy of socialism and the transition period and a relatively long and still ongoing social crisis. This thesis implies that a democratic deficit
inherited from the totalitarian system has not been overcome yet, mostly because the
development of citizens’ political culture has not been stimulating enough. Moreover,
the social crisis has provided fertile ground for all existing non-democratic elements of
the social and political system to thrive. After the establishment of pluralistic society
and democracy, political institutions had the greatest responsibility to function in accord-
ance with the new rules. Looking at the research results, it is fair to say that political actors
have neither followed the proclaimed democratic principles nor met the citizens’
expectations.

In line with the thesis of declining influence of traditional institutions as socialization
agents (Youniss and Levine 2009; Flanagan et al. 2012) the research results indicate that
all relevant agents in the process of political socialization of young people have failed:
family and friends, educational and religious institutions, political actors and media. In
order to educate young people in the spirit of democracy, it is vital to provide the ade-
quate conditions and environment in which they should acquire the necessary knowledge
and skills. In societies without a respectable democratic tradition, the political will and
ability of political actors to create such conditions is of utmost importance. Democratic
values and behavioral patterns are to be respected in all spheres of political and social
life and educational reforms that promote democracy should be implemented. This is
crucial because when political institutions and actors become untrustworthy, the result
is not just a drop in support for democracy but it also leads to delegitimization of the
entire system.

Finally, it can be concluded that the mixture of democratic and subject political
culture among the youth, and probably among all citizens, points to the incompatibility
of political culture and political system in Croatia. Youth political culture equally speaks
about the people and the society they live in. Croatian political system is burdened with
the discrepancy between institutionally implemented liberal-democratic principles and
democratically deficient heritage of socialism as well as with non-democratic political
practices in the post-socialist era and social and economic crisis of the last few years.
In this context, the rise and development of post-materialistic values (Inglehart and
Welzel 2005) that would enhance youth’s democratic political culture is practically dis-
abled. Namely, this context favors materialistic and instrumental motives for social
engagement, especially political participation, at the expense of altruistic motives. Still,
there is participation pluralism among Croatian youth because, besides bigger insti-
tutional political engagement, young people increasingly join various civic initiatives
and organizations, which places them in the group of ‘civic omnivores’ (Hustinx et al.
2012). This finding indicates the tendency of ‘new youth politics’ that presumes different
understanding of politics that is not limited only to conventional forms of political par-
ticipation. In this way, at least some young people in Croatia act as a corrective to
current political processes and pave the way for further democratization in spite of unfa-
vorable circumstances.

Notes

1. Despite the fact that socialism in Croatia (and Yugoslavia) was less dogmatic than in other
socialist regimes, comparative studies show that Croatian citizens criticized its economic and
political performance more than anybody else. Yet it is indicative that after a few years of
living in the newly established democracy, Croatian citizens again expressed the least support for the political system. That was attributed to the negative impact of the homeland war and worsening of the economic crisis which affected a large part of the population (Sekulić and Šporer 1997). Also, it is likely that, before the first multi-party elections, Croatian citizens had great expectations which included peace and security, improvement of living standards and joining the circle of democratic European countries (Grđešić et al. 1991). Those expectations were betrayed due to various unfavorable circumstances which provided fertile ground for discontent. All subsequent research showed permanent dissatisfaction of Croatian citizens with the state of the country (with only small cyclical variations in that respect).

2. In 25 years of democracy in Croatia seven cycles of national parliamentary elections were held and government changed four times. The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) was in power 18 years in total (from 1990 to 1999 as a single party and from 2004 to 2011 in the centre-right coalition as the strongest party); the Social Democratic Party (SDP) ruled for 7 years (2000–2003 and 2012–2015 as the leading party of the centre-left coalition). The length of time and the circumstances in which HDZ held power, places the biggest responsibility on this party for shaping the political system of Croatia in the transition period (Lalović 2000; Ćular 2004).

3. In short, youth political participation in contemporary Croatia is lower than in the socialist period when compared to both younger generations and elderly population. This is manifested in lower levels of political interest, readiness to vote, party affiliation, party membership and representation in government bodies. Young people are also less interested in alternative political engagement than their peers in developed European countries (Ilišin 1999, 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

4. Another important aspect of political participation, representation of young people in government bodies, is not often studied. This is partly because young people are rather rarely members of political parties whose function is to select and nominate representatives of citizens for government agencies and bodies, primarily local and regional authorities. Other reasons are connected with the age stratification and social marginalization of young people. Government bodies are dominated by middle aged politicians (Hague, Harrop, and Breslin 1998); young people’s presence is only symbolic, about 2% on average (Schizzeroto and Gasperoni 2001). In Croatia, similarly, young people are under-represented in local government bodies, about 6% (Ilišin 2006), and in the Croatian Parliament up to 2% (Ilišin 2007b; Ilišin and Ćular 2014).

5. The data used are collected from two research projects of the Institute for Social Research, Value system of the youth and social changes in Croatia (1999, project leaders Vlasta Ilišin and Furio Radin), Young people and European integration processes (2004, project leader Vlasta Ilišin) and from the project of the Ministry of Social Policy Needs, problems and potentials of Croatian youth (2013, project leaders Vlasta Ilišin and Vedrana Spajić-Vrkaš). The latest survey encompassed young people whose education and socialization took place in the transition period while earlier surveys included those young people who completed their primary or both primary and secondary education in the socialist period.

6. Respondents were not told that those were constitutional values and the question was formulated in the following way: How important are these social and political values to you? A four-degree interval scale was offered (very and mostly important and mostly and completely unimportant) with 10–11 variables (after the Constitution was amended in 2001). Young people found all political values mostly or very important. For 4% (respect for human rights) to 19% (democratic and multi-party system) of young respondents constitutional values were mostly or completely unimportant.

7. Relativization of the importance of democratic and multiparty system can be connected to a decline in voter turnout in national elections. More precisely, in the first and second parliamentary elections (in 1990 and 1992) the turnout was 85% and 75%. In the next four cycles it was about 60% and in the last elections (2011) it dropped to 54%. Moreover, only 25% of voters participated in the elections for the European Parliament in 2014. The fact that in the last
three decades the national elections voter turnout has decreased by 10%–20% in established
democracies (Bruter and Harrison 2009) suggests that the situation in Croatia and other Euro-
pean countries is rather similar. The only difference is that ‘exercise in democracy’ has lasted in
Croatia for a rather short period of time and the point of satiation should not have been
reached so soon. We do not have any data on Croatian youth turnout but there are some
data on their somewhat weaker readiness to take part in elections in comparison to adults
(Ilišin 2007a).

8. Social trust among Croatian youth is low as well (Ilišin et al. 2013; Gvozdanović 2014). More
precisely, people trust family members, friends and relatives most. Unlike particularized
trust, generalized trust is quite low. One quarter of young people trust their colleagues, one
fifth their neighbors while only 17% trust people of different religion or political orientation.
Also, 9% trust their acquaintances and only 3% trust people they do not know personally. Insti-
tutional and social distrust imply that trust levels in Croatia are generally very low.

9. The bad image of politicians among young people was confirmed by the survey conducted
among Croatian university students in 2010. The results showed that 60% to 85% of students
resented politicians for giving up on their pre-election promises, being only interested in
people’s votes, not opinions. Students blamed politicians for losing touch with citizens after
elections, neglecting public interest and focusing on personal or party interests (Ilišin 2014).
Such attitudes towards politicians are not expressed only in Croatia; British youth raise
similar objections, to a somewhat lesser extent (Henn, Weinstein, and Forrest 2005; Henn
and Foard 2014).

10. It is interesting to notice that in the last decade of socialism 15% of young people expressed
high interest in politics and 24% no interest at all (Ilišin 1999). So, despite the fact that political
pluralism enriches political life, youth interest in politics has not increased, but significantly
decreased. Identical changes have occurred among Slovenian youth (Ule 1996), which
suggests that democratic institutions alone do not necessarily guarantee the strengthening
of initial capacities for political participation. It is interesting to note that among British
youth, for example, who are also disappointed with (traditional) politics, there are only 12%
of those who are not interested in politics at all (Henn and Foard 2014).

11. Party membership of Croatian citizens and youth fluctuates: during the 1990s, 24% of young
people were members of political parties, then the number dropped to 10% and finally to 5%.
At the same time, adult membership decreased from 28% to 17% and then to 10%. During the
one-party socialist regime, the Communist party membership was higher, among the youth
between 11% and 26% (Ilišin 1999). All these percentages are significantly higher than
those in established European democracies (Pedersen et al. 2004; Cross and Young 2008b;

12. The "Copernican Turn" first happened in the survey conducted among Croatian university stu-
dents in 2010 when their trust in political parties was below 4% and their membership 11%
(Ilišin 2014). Based on that survey, it can be assumed that the beginning of the institutional
trust erosion and the rise in party membership coincided with the beginning of economic
crisis in Croatia. As shown in previous research (Ilišin 2007a), there are similar tendencies in
political attitudes of young people and adults. Political participation of adults is generally
higher, it is likely that adults join parties even more frequently and are equally distrustful of
them.

13. Croatia, a country of about 4,300,000 people, has 52,000 civil society organizations and 144
officially registered political parties out of which around 30% have succeeded in becoming
parliamentary parties. The largest among them HDZ (220,000 members) and SDP (40,000
members) have always won seats in the Parliament, together between 60% and 80% of all
seats. The power and influence of these two parties are the reason why the country’s
highly fragmented party system is bipolarized. It is interesting that, besides 50% of young
people who do not know what their ideological orientation is, 10% of young people in
Croatia position themselves on the left and 10% on the right pole of the ideological scale.
One third are in the political center (Ilišin et al. 2013) although parties declared as centrist
almost always experience electoral defeat. Analysts point to a significant intra-party
democracy deficit in all Croatian political parties. This is particularly noticeable in electoral lists created by presidents and party leaderships. On the one hand, these lists are a great show of power for party leaders and, on the other hand, submissive behavior of party contenders for power and lucrative positions. Also, political party statutes do not allow for fractional organization which is why disagreements often end up in party dissolution. Thus there is a continuous multiplication of new political parties (Kasapović 2001; Zakošek 2002; Ćular 2004; Ilišin 2007b; Ilišin and Ćular 2014).

14. Disputes about the introduction of civic education in Croatian elementary and high schools have been going on for nearly two decades, with varying intensity. It was only in the 2014/2015 school year that civic education was introduced as a cross-curricular program although experimental implementation of civic education in the 2012/2013 school year, conceived as a separate and compulsory subject, showed its positive influence on pupils’ decision making, social engagement and mutual relationships (Spajić-Vrkaš 2014). In the early 1990s, religion was introduced as an optional subject. It is attended by over 90% of elementary school pupils. In high schools which offer ethics as an alternative, the number of students choosing religion is decreasing.

15. Partitocracy is a visible component of the political system in Croatia (Kasapović 2001; Zakošek 2002; Ćular 2004). It is manifested in a powerful influence of political parties on the public sector employment (Bruter and Harrison 2009). The assumption is that this power grows in times of social crisis and consequently expands and strengthens clientelistic behavioral patterns. Namely, political parties are not just instruments to gain specific material benefits and/or springboards for managers, entrepreneurs and those who want to accomplish respectable careers in politics, but they become necessary for getting jobs in the public sector and in private companies which are networked with the political elite. In Croatia, this is especially common in local communities where some parties have been in power continuously, since the beginning of transition, thus creating strong and efficient clientelistic networks. They ensure the survival of a particular political option but also increase the number and appetite of clientelistic groups within the electorate. It is therefore logical to assume that the social crisis has spurred people to join political parties. In socialism, the Communist party membership was a requirement to obtain managing positions in companies as well as in academic institutions. Other jobs were more or less equally available to everyone so as to achieve a higher employment rate. Today parties often decide about all kinds of employment.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References


