

PROJECT TITLE: Comparative study of students' civic engagement in heterogeneous and homogenous sociocultural environments: case study of Croatian students

~supported by the *Student as Producer Fund*~

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## Introduction

A collaborative research project between the University of Warwick (Jure Jerić) and the University of Zagreb (Luka Roje and Mia Roje), Croatia, has elaborated a novel topic of civic engagement among a student population in the different socio-cultural environments. The project entitled “Comparative study of students’ civic engagement in heterogeneous and homogenous sociocultural environments: case study of Croatian students” was created with the following aims:

-to develop a theoretical framework based on the current literature, which will serve as a starting point of the research.

-to develop the most appropriate methodology in order to collect reliable and valid data; hence, mixed methodology with quantitative research as the main method, while qualitative research has been done prior to the main method and *a posteriori* to it.

-to create a standardised questionnaire, which has been empirically tested on a sample of 537 people in order to provide a sophisticated methodological tool for obtaining the valid and comparable data. - to conduct an empirical, quantitative research in two different social groups (Croatian students studying in the United Kingdom, and Croatian students studying in Croatia) with a sample size of 100 participants in each group; hence 200 overall.

-to conduct a preliminary qualitative research, which has been used as guidelines for creating a questionnaire.

-to conduct a follow-up qualitative research, which could additionally explain the most interesting findings, and offer some richer data.

-to critically analyse the findings and write a research article (in English and Croatian)

-to contribute to the existing pool of the Croatian scientific terminology by providing the most suitable translations for some social phenomena, which have not been yet evaluated in the Croatian scientific discourse.

Considering the scope of the research, this report focuses on the key project developments, while the thorough analysis of the findings will be

presented in an upcoming article. Furthermore, the authors have planned to publish the article in an academic journal, so the key findings cannot be presented publicly before being published.

## **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework has been developed on Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's concept (1991) of the "community of practice". It stands for a group with shared ways of doing things and a mutual understanding of behaviour. The emphasis of this approach is on situated learning, a process akin to apprenticeship – learning by doing and observing. However, as Billett (2007) points out, rather than an individual being posterior to the social practice in which they engage, the relationship is agentic on both sides. Therefore, this combined perspective is essential to our own focus in which we want to address the key issue: the interrelationship of agency and social environment consequently related to the level of civic engagement. In other words, it is impossible to determine whether social environment exclusively influences the actions of an agent, or the agent shapes the environment. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a more holistic approach, which allows for more sophisticated networks of relationships with different intensities.

Although the main focus of the research is not in transnational aspects of civic engagement, but rather the practice of citizenship, we take seriously the role of, what anthropologist Lok C. Diu (2005) calls, the "third space" of diaspora. It stands for the space between the past and life in the homeland, and the present and life in the new country. In fact, this is a very important theoretical point in explaining the results of the research as it sheds additional light on potential differences between students studying in the UK and those studying in Croatia.

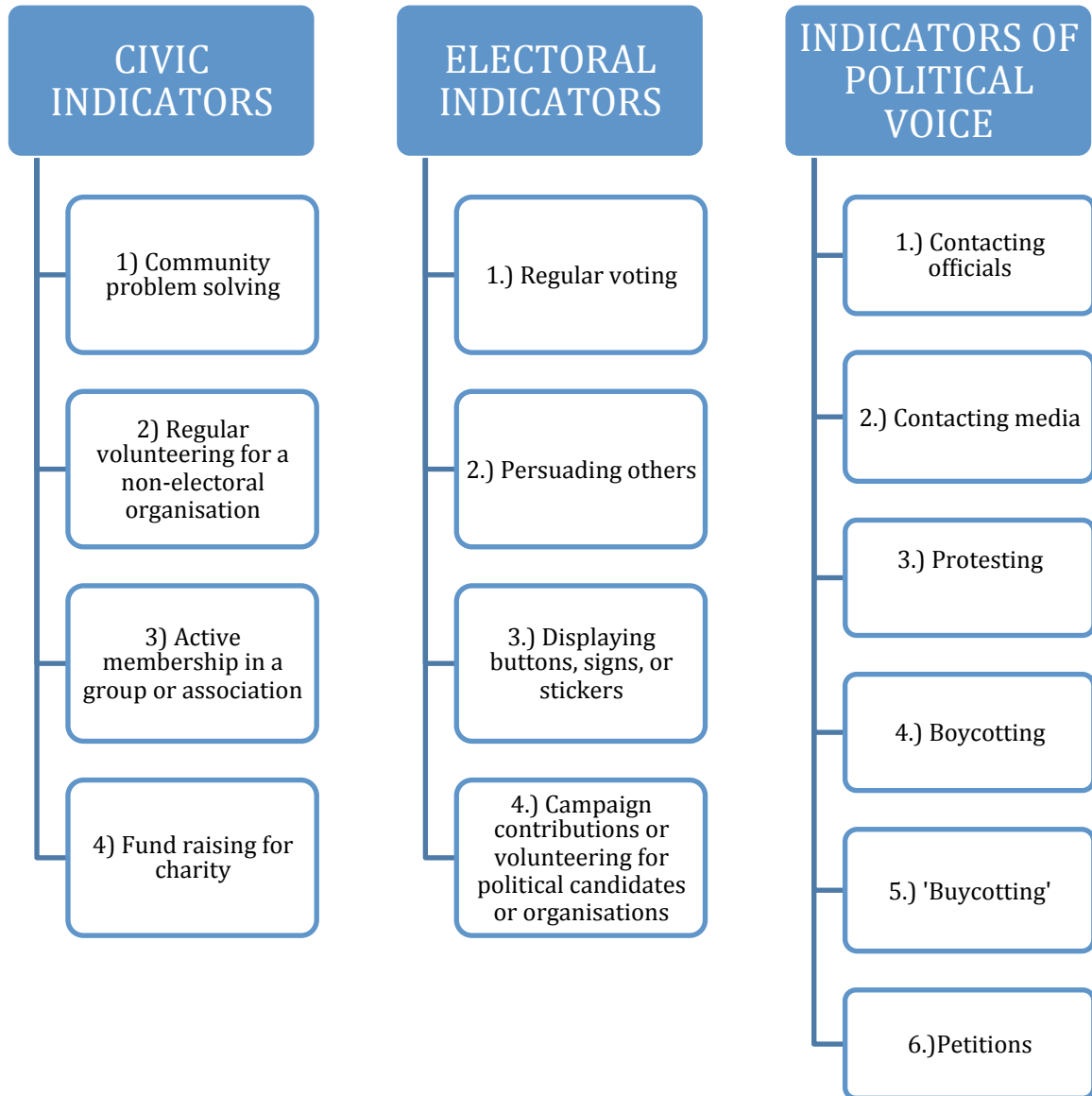
Focusing on the more practical side of the research, 19 core indicators have been employed for measuring the level of civic engagement. More specifically, the research looks at a panorama of 19 core activities — ranging from voting to volunteering to signing petitions — and at many other political attitudes and behaviours. They have been initially developed by Keeter, et al. (2002). However, they have been adjusted to reflect the wider set of socio-cultural patterns embedded in the Croatian

lifestyle and behaviour. For example, in Croatia there is no practice of promoting political parties by canvassing, so this variable has been avoided. The following illustration offers a detailed analysis of the indicators that have been measured in the questionnaire. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the current literature does not offer any evaluation of civic engagement of Croatian students or youth; furthermore, this topic is widely understudied (Milanovic, 2009). Therefore, it highlights the potential contribution of this research, especially in the following areas:

a) Empirically investigates civic engagement of the Croatian student population

b) Offers a comparison of the levels of civic engagement of students studying abroad and those residing in their home country. To the best of our knowledge, we have not come across similar research that evaluates this subject matter.

## Civic engagement<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup>Based on Keeter, S., Zukin, C., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K. (2002). The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

## Methodology

The methodological framework was grounded on an epistemological idea of “paradigm of choices” (Patton, 2002:257), as the main criteria for selection of the methods was their ability to address the research goals. In this context, the most suitable option was to employ mixed methodology (Morgan, 1998), consisting of two lines. The main research method was a quantitative large-scale questionnaire, with two steps of qualitative research: preliminary and follow-up; gathered through semi-structured interviews. Based on Morgan’s idea of “complementary assistance” (1998), the aim was to use the quantitative method to find out more about general patterns in the society, while the preliminary qualitative method was used to advance the standardized questionnaire. The qualitative follow-up was done in order to gather some richer data, which could additionally explain the results obtained through the questionnaires, but also to offer new perspectives in the inductive terms.

As one of the key contributions of this research, especially in the context of methodology, it has provided the standardised, empirically tested questionnaire, specifically created for the Croatian students, thus, incorporating the key social features which are distinctive for that geographical area, and the socio-cultural environment. Considering that the research has been partially conducted in the UK, the whole process has been executed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998, and the British Sociological Association Ethics Guidelines (2004).

Regarding the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, there was a methodological concern regarding the usage of the Internet as a medium for collection of data. However, considering that online surveys “are in their infancy” (Bryman, 2008:649), there are no wider methodological objections to its usage. Furthermore, as Yun and Trumbo point out “the electronic-only survey is advisable when resources are limited and the target population suits an electronic survey” (2000). Therefore, the most suitable option was to gather data through self-completion questionnaires, which were distributed via email with a link to the survey. For the purposes of collecting data, the official internet platform of the University of Zagreb has been used (<http://limesurvey.srce.hr/index.php?sid=27729&lang=hr>).

In order to be able to systematically collect the data it was important to

negotiate access to the two different student communities: the Croatian students studying in the UK and the Croatian students studying in Croatia. The sampling method was based on a combination of representative and convenience sampling considering that the help of governmental institutions was required in order to contact a sufficient number of Croatian students in the UK.

The non-proportionality method of a sampling process was done within the existing pool of research participants. All qualitative interviews were semi-structured, conducted according to an interview guide, and lasted for 25 to 35 minutes. After the fieldwork, all data was anonymised, partially transcribed and codified using the software NVivo.

## **Conclusion**

“Comparative study of students’ civic engagement in heterogeneous and homogenous sociocultural environments: case study of Croatian students” has attempted to contribute to the existing literature by providing the empirical data for an elaboration of the very important topic of civic engagement.

This research has primarily focused on quantifying civic engagement and identifying the key differences between the two social groups of the Croatian students: those studying in the UK and those studying in Croatia. However, this research also has the potential of identifying more general trends and projecting possible future outcomes. In fact, considering the Croatian membership in the European Union, expected for July 2013, this research has valuable implications for understanding the importance of a multicultural educational experience for a development of civic engagement. Furthermore, it directly supports the EU policies on international education mobility programmes; also, it highlights the long-term benefits of the Croatian membership in a relation to the projected level of growth of civic engagement.