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Citizenship as given or taken? Meanings and practices among majority and minority youth

Zuzana Petrovičová, Jan Šerek, Michaela Porubanová, & Petr Macek

Abstract

Present study sheds more light on the conceptualization of citizenship and civic engagement among majority and minority youth. In order to understand the meanings of citizenship, fourteen focus groups were conducted with young people aged 16-26, with both civically engaged and disengaged young ethnic Czechs, Roma, and Ukrainians. Results suggest that young people understand the citizenship as having multiple dimensions (legal and personal, and in terms of rights and responsibilities) and civic engagement as being focused on various aspects. The way people described their position within society was influenced by the social background and mirrored in the views on full citizenship.

Introduction

What does it mean to be a citizen? A more recent understanding of citizenship is shifting away from narrow definitions and formal participation toward broader meanings and a focus on the ‘civic side of citizenship’ (Conover & Searing, 2002; Hermes & Dahlgren, 2006). This paper examines these meanings among majority and minority groups while considering background and experiences.

Young people’s conceptions of citizenship are important as they relate to civic engagement in the future (Metzger & Smetana, 2009; 2010). These conceptions are not necessarily identical with traditional ones that often build on legal aspects and purely political life. For example, one’s civic ‘rights and responsibilities’ emerge toward late adolescence when the right to vote and some other political rights are guaranteed (e.g., age 18 in the Czech Republic). However, one’s political and civic attitudes develop prior to being able to exercise those traditional political behaviors (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001). Moreover, research shows that young people are increasingly engaged in civic activities that are not restricted by the legal age, such as volunteering (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Briddell, & Osgood, 2011).

The conceptualization of what it means to be a citizen, what it means to be engaged in a public sphere and political life and how this creates one's identity as an active participant in a society differs among various social groups. Jankowski (2002) showed that particularly youth who feel marginalized from main-stream society (i.e., poor and minority) tend to be apathetic and disengaged from civic life. Their sense of commitment to outside-of-their-own-ethnic groups might be negatively affected by the discrimination and prejudice often experienced by minorities (Fischer, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000). Verba, Burns & Schlozman (2003) pointed out the importance of understanding ethnicity as being intertwined with social class background. Since the experiences and traditions of minority youth often differ from those of the majority, the influence these experiences have on the conceptualization of citizenship need to be considered. However, much of the research has been conducted outside of Europe and may not generalize.

The issues of citizenship and ethnicity are essential for current Czech society. Due to the events associated with World War II (the Jewish and Roma holocaust, the postwar deportation of the German minority), Czech society became relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity in the second half of the 20th century. The only group that could be theoretically described as an ethnic minority was the Slovaks, who, however, had very similar culture and language, and whose country was politically united with the Czech territory throughout that historic period. The homogeneity was sustained also by the communist regime (1948-1989) which held the country isolated from non-communist parts of the world. Since the collapse of the regime in 1989, Czech society had experienced an increasing level of immigration (Wallace, 2002). These historic dynamics present a challenge for immigrants, who are coming to a society that used to be ethnically homogenous for several decades, but also for ethnic Czechs, who have to (re)learn how to live in a multiethnic society and to redefine their notions of citizenship in order to include non-ethnic Czechs.

In the presented study, the rationale and criteria for selection of the minority groups was determined by the size (representation) of the minority and migrant groups in Czech Republic. Besides the majority (ethnic Czechs), we examined Roma and Ukrainian minorities in our study. These selected minority groups account for the largest ethnic and migrant groups respectively and share unique position in the society, therefore we feel it appropriate to briefly introduce some specific characteristics of Roma and Ukrainians in the Czech Republic.

Roma

Experts estimate that there are approximately 150-000 to 300-000 Roma¹ currently living in Czech Republic (1-3% of the national population). However, statistical data collected during census taking (Czech Statistical Office, 2006) shows approximately 11,000 – 12,500 Roma living in the Czech Republic. According to the 2001 Census, 22% of Roma attended secondary school (5% of those graduated), and only 1.6% obtained higher education. The socio-economical status of 90% of Roma is classified as low, a figure that is reflected in a high unemployment rate. Roma often face destitute living conditions, prejudice and discrimination in the labor market and in education system, and are perceived by many Czechs as being dependent on the Czech welfare state. This negative stance is exemplified by the findings of the Eurobarometer study (European Commission, 2008) where 47% of the Czech participants claimed they would feel uncomfortable having Roma as neighbors (the highest number among EU countries).

Ukrainians

Ukrainians account for the largest migrant group in the Czech Republic. Their immigration is primarily for temporary work followed by return back to Ukraine. The proportion of Ukrainians seeking permanent residency is rather small (Wallace, 2002). The number of Ukrainians living in the Czech Republic varies from 130,000 to 250,000. According to the 2001 Census 62% of the Ukrainians attended secondary school, and of these 35% graduated, 12% attended higher education. In terms of socio-economic status, the majority of Ukrainian citizens in the Czech Republic are unskilled workers even though the qualifications they hold are typically far higher. The relationship between the Ukraine and the Czech Republic is positively marked by business-economic and foreign policy ties and the Ukraine is seen as linked to the Czech Republic on both a cultural and historical level. At the same time however, many Czechs have a negative perception of Ukrainians (due to association with the generally abhorred former Soviet Union) and perceive them as merely cheap and unskilled construction and industrial workers. These negative evaluations are reflected by the results of a 2011 survey (Červenka, 2011) in which the average evaluation of Ukrainians was 4.5 on a ‘1-very likeable; 7-not very likeable’ scale (representing bottom third score compared to the evaluation of other migrant groups).

¹ Data are taken from Romani organizations and available independent researchers. Although the discrepancy between the estimates and the statistical (Census) data has not been fully explained, one of the strong reasons behind the low numbers being reported could lie in the fact that some people might identify themselves as Roma in daily life but refrain from such identification in official documentation due to the fear of negative perceptions and some kind of discrimination.

Research aim

To better understand changing definitions of citizenship, especially for the younger generation, we aim to explore people's own conceptualization of what it means to be a citizen, how people see themselves and their role in society. Specifically, we consider the role one's ethnic/migrant background and personal experiences play in the meanings and practices of citizenship. Taken the context into the account, the findings are discussed from the perspective of equality and availability of resources and opportunities.

Method

A total of 89 young Czechs, Roma and Ukrainians participated in the present study (53 females, aged 16-26) conducted in two regions of Czech Republic: in South Moravian region (Brno) and Prague, covering two largest cities in the country. Data was collected during Spring/Summer 2010 as a part of larger European project Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation (PIDOP). All data are based on the analysis of responses, which took place in controlled group discussions (focus groups). Detailed description of focus groups compositions by ethnicity, age, and gender is presented in Table 1.

In order to include individuals with various levels of involvement in civic and political life, we employed a purposefully targeted sampling strategy via gatekeepers, teachers, non-governmental organization representatives and leaders of cultural, civic, and youth groups. In class and online advertising of the opportunity to participate in the focus groups was also employed. The snowball technique did not allow us to have absolute control over the composition of the groups, however, considering the specifics of the national and ethnic groups and accessibility, this method proved to be a feasible compromise. Participants were informed about the goal of the study, method, and signed the informed consent authorizing us to audio and videotape the discussion.

Group discussions were conducted and facilitated by the two authors of the article. The discussions were structured as follows: First was examined how young Czechs, Roma, and Ukrainians characterize the citizen and who constitute a citizen to them. Then, the respondents were asked what are the ways for citizens to engage and participate in society, followed by an inquiry about their own involvement in civic and political issues and the experiences that they had in this area. All focus groups were then transcribed, and coded using Atlas.ti software.

--- Table 1 here ---

In order to identify various conceptualizations of citizenship among youth, we subjected data to inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We then analyzed how these concepts differ among three ethnic groups. Lastly we looked at how these concepts translate into civic engagement with respect to experiences specific to the three ethnic groups. The results are organized according to the research question (followed by focus group question):

- (1) How do young Czechs, Roma, and Ukrainians describe their citizenship? (What does it mean to you to be a citizen in Czech Republic?)
- (2) What are the ways in which people civically engage in the society? (What does it mean for you to be civically engaged? Are you civically engaged?)

Results

Conceptions of citizenship

The responses were coded and grouped into the categories with similar meaning. We were able to identify four overarching concepts of citizenship:

(1) Understanding the citizenship was often related to legal dimension. One Roma participant stated quite broad definition: *'Everyone is a citizen...even someone from Africa'* (~16-18 years of age). More narrow understanding drew on specifically legal membership of the state or nation: *'[A citizen] is a person who has stamp in a passport that he/she has citizenship of some state'* (~Ukrainian, 16-18 years of age). The sense of membership was also related to the geographical aspect. A young Roma male saw a citizen as *'a person who holds citizenship status of a state and lives here for a long time'*, (~Roma, 16-18 years of age).

(2) Another common theme was emphasis on various rights. These ranged from wide and general descriptions, such as a *'citizen has rights to everything that is not forbidden to him/her'* (~majority, 16-18 years of age,) to legal rights specifically related to the status of the citizen, such as the right to vote, right to reside in the country, right to work *'They can't throw the person out, like if he's a citizen, they can't throw him out of the state...or they can't deny him right to work and he doesn't need work permit'*(~Ukrainian, 16-18 years of age,). A number of participants spoke about more general human rights, such as right to have a voice.

One Ukrainian female also characterized citizen as person who *'has right to have his/her own opinion'* (~ 16-18 years of age). When asked about the difference in citizen's rights in Czech Republic and Ukraine the issue of corruption was common to all immigrant focus groups. Moreover, having the formal right and the fact that this right is respected were closely linked *'It is written down the same in Ukraine, the rights are the same; but nobody follows them there. Well not nobody, but very few people follow those rights. Take employment for example. There are so many unemployed people in Ukraine, they do not have jobs and nobody is helping them. Or social care and right to get help; it's the same with that. People in Ukraine have to pay for everything, but they are not being paid much.'* (~Ukrainian, 16-18 years of age).

(3) Related to the emphasis on rights was the notion of the responsibilities (duties) of the citizens. Younger participants saw citizenship as abiding the rules and laws of the society: *'[A citizen] has to abide the law'* (~Ukrainian, 16-18 years of age; *'[A citizen] has to abide by school rules'* (~Roma, 16-18 years of age). Older participants talked more about the responsibilities of the citizens to society and the way it is functioning: *'It is like, some feeling of being responsible for, well, for how it's going to work in the society, for what is going to happen'* (~majority, 20-26 years of age). The issue of abiding the rules of the society and being responsible towards other members was of specific importance to immigrant participants. Young Ukrainian participants stated that *'I think that it is a duty of each citizen here in Czech Republic to behave and be considerate of others'* and *'It is [citizen's] responsibility to abide by the laws of the state where one lives...both legal law and moral law'* (~16-18 year of age).

(4) The notion of the citizenship as a moral code of people living together in the community or nation was constant throughout the interviews. The personal dimension present in an understanding of citizenship was described in terms of moral and emotional bonds. A young Roma male described citizenship as *'behaving in a decent way and being tolerant of others'* (~Roma, 16-18 years of age). It was mostly minority youth, who spoke of citizenship as present on a day-to-day basis in people's lives and as related to one's personal and social identity. As one Ukrainian male explained *'It is more important how one feels than what's in his/her passport'* (~20-26 years of age).

Although all four concepts were mentioned by participants in all ethnic and age groups and were not mutually exclusive, we were able to identify differences between majority and

minority groups regarding the emphasis that people ascribed to these concepts. Immigrant youth explicitly pointed out the contrast between the legal and personal dimension of the citizenship. As one Ukrainian female explained *'I am here for eight years; therefore I rather feel to be a Czech. I lived eight years in Ukraine and eight years here, and a vast majority of everything started to be formed, personality and this, rather here. So all friends and environment, everything was here, therefore I feel rather as a citizen of the Czech Republic, although I am not'* (~16-18 years of age). The absence of legal citizenship and length of stay were mentioned most often as affecting one's sense of belonging. A young Ukrainian woman explained her view on citizenship as *'depending on how long you are here [Czech Republic]. I am here for short time and I feel very limited. And I experience discrimination every day. The difference is huge.'* (~20-26 years of age). Statements of Roma participants on citizenship often reflected their personal experiences. They emphasized responsibilities that one has as citizen (going to work, respect to laws and rules), and personal dimension (being considerate and tolerant). Younger Czech participants (16-18 years of age), as opposed to older ones (20-26 years of age) emphasized the age aspect of the legal dimension. One participant described the process of becoming fullright citizen in terms of specific milestones: *'...a person is not fullright till the age of 15, because not many people listen to him or take him seriously, then between 15 and 18 years of age people look at him as somewhat grown up with his own ideas, ...and from the age of 18 others take him as an actual adult because by that age one should know what to do and pursue it'*(~ majority, 16-18 years of age).

Conceptions of civic engagement

The question we asked our participants aimed to understand their idea about what constitutes civic engagement. We were also interested in participatory experiences and differences between the young people from the three different ethnic/migrant groups.

Civic engagement was understood in terms of conventional forms including voting or being a member of political parties, and non-conventional forms such as signing petitions or participating in demonstrations. Participants also spoke of the variety of individual or collective civic activities that citizens involve themselves in (e.g. consumerism, volunteering, charity work).

When asked about one's own civic engagement, the ethnic/nationality group differences became apparent. The issue of discrimination emerged in all minority groups and was related to the focus of one's civic engagement. For the Roma civic engagement was

mostly focused on their own community with an aim to overcome the difficult life situation of other Roma. Moreover, Roma participants emphasized the role of one's resources (level of education, financial security, and time) and mobilizing agents. One female working for a Roma non-government organization described her civic engaged in terms of '*...meeting the right people. If I didn't end up in here [NGO], I would not use the opportunities. I would care about school, about having a job and then about having a family. But if the opportunity arises, I don't know, like, for taking part in something, I go for it. But would I voluntarily surf the web for some fundraising events, or to get involved in something? It's not like that.*' (~Roma, 20-26 years of age). Ukrainians spoke about their immigrant status, which did not allow them to participate in traditional political activities (voting, party membership) as a great barrier. At the same time, integration into the Czech society by getting education and being financially self-sufficient, were perceived as ways of being civically engaged. As one Ukrainian male explained, being civically engaged citizen means "*financial literacy, so people invest in right way, not to waste money, maybe something like financial management*" (~ 20-26 years of age). In addition, some of the participants pointed out the importance of ensuring the equality: '*We, young people, have to want our rights as people, as foreigners here, as citizens, to be respected*' (~Ukrainian, 16-18 years of age). Majority participants talked about the wide variety of activities they engage in, ranging from membership in political party to consumerism. Participants did not feel restrained or excluded from civic and political life and the matter of one's civic engagement was perceived as a matter of personal choice. One participant summed up by saying that "*Well I do believe that young people take part in the most things we talked about [voting, volunteering, membership in organizations, civic disobedience as means to emphasize certain issue, consumerism], in some of these activities maybe more than in others, but [young people] do engage in all of that.*" (~ 20-26 years of age).

Discussion

This paper aimed to contribute to recent interest in understanding citizenship and civic engagement among today's youth. Moreover, we invited the largest ethnic and migrant minorities in the country into the debate and focused on how one's background and experiences affect meanings of these concepts.

Our research showed that young people perceive citizenship as a complex and multidimensional concept. Analyzing the interviews, we identified four common themes:

legal and personal aspects of citizenship, as well as rights and responsibilities of citizens. The dimensions were not described as being separate but rather as interconnected. Rights and responsibilities were often spoken of as being two sides of the same coin; a personal dimension of citizenship was present throughout the focus groups, whether as a contrast or a complement to the legal dimension, which itself was related to both one's rights and responsibilities.

Discussing citizenship with young people pointed out two possible ways of perceiving one's position in society: citizenship as *something given* and as *something taken*. Citizenship as given refers to the notion that it is owned by everyone and provides one with equal opportunities. In contrast, citizenship as taken denotes the awareness of inequality, where certain groups cannot access opportunities and resources accessed by others. As such, full citizenship is something people need to actively pursue. The way in which people perceived themselves as citizens (given or taken) is translated into their views on civic engagement and their own engagement in society. More precisely, civic engagement was perceived as either fulfillment of the opportunities offered by full citizenship, or the instrument that helps people to reach a status of full citizen.

If *taken* citizenship is viewed in terms of legal and personal dimensions then the concern about 'being left out' from the society becomes salient. Civic engagement, on the legal level, takes a form of targeting officials and policy makers. On the personal level, it takes the form of enhancing the status of the group within the society. These two ways of approaching citizenship and engagement were present among Ukrainians, who perceived citizenship *as taken*, something they needed to work for and was not given to them. They perceived the absence of the legal citizenship as restricting them from participation in political life, such as voting. Therefore, civic engagement meant influencing immigration policies of the state (easier acquirement of the permanent residency, work permit, and political rights). Additionally, the personal dimension of civic engagement included complying with the norms of the societal majority as well as active attempts to influence (often negative) perceptions of their migrant group by the majority.

Citizenship perceived *as given* is seen as providing people with opportunities that they might take advantage of. People are granted certain rights as citizens of the country and are provided with the freedom to utilize them or not. This perspective of citizenship was seen in

some participants from the majority, who had better socio-economic status in the society and were free of language and cultural barriers.

Finally, some people can be described as having both conceptions of citizenship. Specifically, certain dimensions of citizenship are perceived as *given*, but others as *taken*. For instance, many Roma participants reported legal dimension of citizenship as given, i.e. equal to their counterparts from majority. However, on the personal level, Roma sometimes felt ‘left out’ from the society, similar to Ukrainians. In the line with this, civic engagement was understood as overcoming negative stereotypes about Roma and helping others form their community (see also Šerek, Petrovičová, & Macek, 2011). Further, Roma pointed out that many rights are formally *given* to all citizens, such as equal access to labor market and education, but at the same time these rights must be *taken*. Two specific causes were preventing Roma from exercising their rights – inequality in one’s resources (financial, educational) and discrimination based on ethnicity. As a result, civic engagement can lie in obtaining resources despite facing the discrimination.

This paper aimed to contribute to the better understanding of how people perceive their citizenship and their civic engagement within the society. Looking at the participatory levels of citizens solely from the perspective that we live in a democratic nation, where opportunities and rights of all citizens are equal, seems almost naïve. Our findings support and extend those of Verba, Burns, & Schlozman (2003), who pointed out that class and ethnic background does play a role in differences in participation. This paper shows that not only are there differences in objectively measured levels of participation (Verba et al., 2003), but these differences are rooted in deeper meanings of citizenship that people hold. The way people approach citizenship and civic engagement seems to be related to many domains of their experiences. We therefore suggest that practices of civic engagement, especially those of minorities, must be understood in the light of everyday lives, where many things are not just *given*, but must be actively *taken*.

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