VOTE OUT OF THE BOX

Undoubtedly, today, in the 21st century, democracy is the most widespread and successful political idea. It is a political system in which the people of a country rule through any form of government they choose to establish. But there is one problem – the problem of low youth participation in political processes. As the matter of fact, according to the Central Election Commission, here in Ukraine in 1999, over 60% of 18-29-year-olds were voting in general presidential elections. By 2019, that had dropped to 40%. That means that nearly two-thirds of young people have ignored the election. The similar trend is also observed in democracies from all over the world. So, if the majority of young people are not voting and opinions of minorities are not taken into account, can we call such society democratic?

Presumably, many of these young people will grow up to have children, who are markedly less likely to vote if their parents don't. Consequently, overall turnout will decrease to an absurdly low level. And that means that we are in trouble. Worse still, politicians aren't going to do anything about it. Why? Because politicians, fundamentally, chase votes. The young are expected not to vote, so no one is chasing them. The government looks after the people who have elected it – old people. And the issues of older voters are the issues that dominate in our political landscape.

Some people might believe that young person not voting is the reason of them being uncaring, apathetic or lazy. I can't agree with this statement. They care very much. Young people are passionate about social action, they're volunteering in greater numbers than ever before, and they campaign online. All over the world, throughout history, young people have driven social change. They've been the spark that has ignited social movements. And without the actions of young people the world would look a very different place. For instance, just in recent decades, young people have been leaders in the Revolution of dignify in Ukraine, the Arab Spring, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA and in many others movements and

revolutions. But, if young people care very deeply about issues, and if they have the power in numbers to affect change, the things they care about and for their communities, then why don't we see more young people voting or getting interested in politics and involved into it? Because they've lost faith, or never had faith, in the top-down political process. For most young people, the political sphere seems to be something "unattainable". They don't believe that the main political leaders understand the issues that affect them most. They feel like they're the last group that politicians want to talk to, and they're probably right. Therefore, the statistics are disappointing. According to a poll by the "Democratic Initiatives" foundation, only 23% of young people are constantly interested in the political life in Ukraine and only 8% of young people are involved into social activities.

So, how to solve this problem? Before offering solutions it is necessary to identify the main causes of low youth turnout in the elections and their passive civic stand.

Firstly, an abysmal civics education system. Political illiteracy of the population and manipulation of public opinion create in young people an image of politics as a "dirty game". Therefore, the desire to be interested and directly participate in it is lost.

Secondly, the rules and regulations around our electoral system, around getting access to voting. Let's take registration, for instance, and the fact that you have to register before you can even vote, or the fact that registration is tied to an address. Young people are highly mobile. They move, they travel, they study or work away from home. As a rule, it is easier not to vote than to go through the procedure of changing the place of registration. So, they lose their registration – they lose their ability to vote.

Thirdly, young people get very little outreach and mobilization from campaigns and candidates. They don't reach out to them in almost any given election. Young people again don't vote, and the vicious cycle continues.

And last but not least, our political culture. Thinking at a societal level, our culture discourages, or at least it certainly doesn't encourage, in any sincere way,

young people to vote. It is completely socially acceptable for a young person or young people not to vote.

To sum up all above, it is clear that now the main task of the state and society is to activate the sociopolitical activity of young people and those who have been disappointed in our political system. In this context, it is very important to mention youth policy, which shapes the country's political culture. It is worth to mention that the youth policy of each state rests on three whales: government, NGOs, and youth centers and spaces.

So, first of all, if we want to increase the number of people with active civic stand at national level, we need to start with the changes at the regional level. From my own experience, I can say that today youth, especially inhabitants of small cities and villages, don't know anything about social activities, the possibility of informal education and do not see themselves able to provide serious changes in their communities. And now think of all the premises in these areas-such as Palaces of Culture that remained from the time of the Soviet Union, which are now abandoned or serve as a shelter for young people who come there to smoke a cigarette or two away from the eyes of adults. At the same time, it is possible to provide useful leisure for young people by converting these buildings into the youth centers. These open spaces will be a place where everyone can come, find like-minded people, unite and discuss meaningful issues. Of course, there are thousands of such centers across the country right now. But are they effective enough? So, it is necessary to provide the proper facilities for such centers and trainings for youth workers and leaders.

From time to time I hear from different people they don't vote because they can't differentiate between the major political parties, and they don't know enough about what's going on politically. Or something like that: "Well, I'm not sure if I'm informed enough. I don't know if I know enough about the issues, to vote right now, to make a good decision. Maybe I will wait till I get older." Moreover, in the media, you have this overwhelmingly vast, fast-moving stream of evolving information. And it's not to mention the fact that almost all media platforms are

biased. And what people need, actually, is just a place to start. But, where can they find reliable information? And how to make this process interesting? Voter advice applications (VAAs) provide an entry point. Essentially you go online and you answer a series of questions by ticking a number of options, then at the end, the app matches you with a party or a candidate that you have most in common with. VAAs demand much-needed clarity from the parties too, because when designers consult with the parties to ascertain their positions on every question, the parties can't be vague or blather on about fairness. The really frustrating thing I find about VAAs is they're not even new. They're big in Europe, they're big in Germany (StemWijzer, Wahl-o-Mat) and Holland (Kieskompas) where they are integrated into the media. These platforms motivate users to learn more about political applications, they can compare their results with friends, colleagues, and families, which just goes to show it's a widely-spread idea, perfectly suited to a young population so used to connecting with one another over social networks. We can use it in schools to provide political and citizenship education from an early age. Here in Ukraine we have iVote platform. However, it was only launched during the election 2019.

"They don't speak my language" is another problem that was mentioned above. The gap between young people and political candidates. But does it mean that more young people are likely to vote for someone closer to their age? Not exactly. A prime example of this is the seventy-eight-year-old Bernie Sanders, a potential Democratic presidential candidate in the USA. Despite his age, he is extremely popular among American youth. And all because of the fact that he has included issues that bother them in his election program. For instance, most of all young people like his proposal to make student loans cheaper and provide free tuition at state-owned colleges and universities. So, if any politician thinks: "That's really unfair. I care about young people. I want them to vote.", that's would be great.

The main thing that we need today is an electoral culture that is about being together. Together, in loud and passionate ways. So, that instead of "do your duty,"

voting can feel more like "join the club". Imagine if we had a concerted effort to revive a face-to-face set of ways to engage and electioneer all over the country right now, in local places but nationwide: outdoor shows in which candidates and their causes are mocked and praised in broad satirical style; soapbox speeches by citizens; public debates held inside pubs; streets filled with political art and handmade posters and murals. And the fact is that all around the world, today, millions of people are voting like this. In India, there are colorful festivals on the elections day. In Brazil, election day is a festive, carnival-type atmosphere. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, there is a spectacle, eye-popping, eye-grabbing spectacle to the street theater of elections.

There are more effective and radical tools to attract a passive electorate, particularly young people. For example, lowering the electoral threshold to 16, implementation of the compulsory voting and creating an electronic voting system. However, it is impossible to implement them without changing the constitution. Moreover, the implementation of these measures might have unpredictable consequences without creating the necessary conditions and previous voter's preparation.

In Germany, for example, in some federal states today, the age for participating in municipal elections has been reduced to 16 years. Students vote in schools for real parties - this is how civic education works in Europe's successful countries. This approach contributes to raising the political awareness of young people and developing a "habit" to vote. However, such reform won't be positive in all countries, unless the appropriate conditions will be created there.

The similar situation with compulsory voting. Compulsory voting is executed through the payment of a fine for failure to vote. Among countries that provide this rule are Australia, Switzerland, Brazil, North Korea and others. In Australia, the fine is about 20 dollars. Just enough to act as a disincentive to the millions of first-time voters there. This is about forming the voting habit early, making it a part of people's lives that they just don't question. Someone says that that's undemocratic. No, it isn't. Undemocratic is people not voting. This, at worst,

could be described as "illiberal." But, at the same time it is also clear that it is not okay to make people vote for one of the available parties if none of the available parties sufficiently represent their views or they just don't do it.

The situation is very controversial with regard to electronic voting. The only country in the world to vote from your own computer at the parliamentary elections is Estonia. Several countries have dismissed online voting due to cyber threats after years of testing this technology. Moreover, so far, countries where voters could vote online have not received confirmation of higher youth activity. Of course, the world is changing very fast. There is always a chance to set a precedent. Online elections are especially relevant for people with disabilities and residents of remote villages. However, we can simplify the process of changing voting location instead. It's about implementing this procedure online.

Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. It is the only thing that ever has". This shows that the main task of our society is not just to get the voices of young people, vulnerable groups and representatives of minorities, but also to motivate them to act, to take an active public position and to be able to provide changes.