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Political competence of Croatian secondary school students 2010-2021*

Berto Šalaj
University of Zagreb, Croatia
Anja Gvozdanović
Institute for Social Research Zagreb, Croatia
Martina Horvat
Ambidexter Club, Croatia

Introduction

Analysing the functioning of democratic political systems, American political scientist Robert Dahl, one of the most respectable modern theorists of democracy, remarks in his book *Democracy and Its Critics* that “The democratic process is a gamble on the possibilities that a people, in acting autonomously, will learn how to act rightly (1999 [1989]: 187). This sentence embeds one of the fundamental questions related to democracy understood as a political regime that implies the government of the people. It is the question that has engaged the minds of politicians and political scientists around the world, and that can be succinctly put the following way: to what extent are the people, i.e. citizens, who are granted the right to make the most important political decisions in democratic orders, equipped with the competences necessary to reach high-quality decisions?

In the aforementioned book, Dahl states that enlightened understanding is one of the fundamental criteria of the democratic process. Under that, he understands that every member of *demos* should have the opportunity to be informed about and educated on the issues that need to be decided upon so that he/she could base their decisions upon these issues on such understanding. The enlightened understanding of political issues, according to Dahl, obviously presumes high levels of political competences of members of a particular *demos*, i.e. citizens. Dahl's theses are supported by a significant number of contemporary political and social theorists (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Lupia, 2016; Vujčić 2001, 2008) who believe that political competence is an essential dimension of the democratic political culture and a vital

* This article is an original paper. Nevertheless, it substantially builds on the studies of the authors who previously thematised political knowledge and attitudes of Croatian secondary school students by using the data bases also used in the present study (Bagić, 2011a; Šalaj, 2011; Bagić and Šalaj, 2011, 2016; Ćulum, Gvozdanović and Baketa, 2016; Baketa, Bovan and Matić Bojić, 2021). This paper is, so far, the only study that simultaneously uses data bases from all three time points of the research.

precondition for reflecting on various political issues, and for active and responsible participation of citizens in political processes.

To what extent does the political practice of contemporary societies meet the aforementioned presumptions? The question on the state of citizens' political competences in democratic political orders is thematised both in theoretical treatises, and in empirical research. Unfortunately, this statement applies much less to Croatia, where systematical research of Croatian citizens' political competences are rare.

This paper aims to bridge the existing gap, thereby focusing on the political competences of youth, i.e., more specifically, of final-year students of Croatian secondary schools. Given the aforementioned aim, the paper is organised into a couple of sections. In the first, theoretical part, we explicate the concept of political competence and point to some related terms that are used in the literature on socio-cultural presumptions of quality functioning of democracy. In the second part, we briefly describe the sources of data, present the main research questions and explicate the operationalisation of our main variables. The third and central part consists of results and interpretation. In the fourth part, we additionally discuss the results, placing them in the wider Croatian socialization-educational context and we examine, in the form of theses that can serve as a basis for further research, the possible reasons behind the current state of youth political competences in Croatia. In the conclusion, we summarise the main findings.

The results presented in the paper outline the state of political competences of Croatian secondary school students during the second, and at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. Therefore, they can be interesting to all those who are analysing the current political situation, as well as the political future of Croatia, along with those who are dealing with education and educational policies. Moreover, the research represents a kind of a pioneering endeavour in attempting to analyse political competences, thus having the potential to serve as a further instigation for the research of youth or the whole population of Croatia, as well as other democratic states. Such research are necessary if the aim is to approach the process of building a democratic political culture in an informed way, particularly if attempting to systematically reflect on the role of the educational system in this process.

Theoretical framework

The question of the conditions of high-quality and stable functioning of democratic orders is one of the most significant, and also most complex questions, which social sciences, especially political science, are trying to answer. The overview of research (Šalaj and Bovan,

2023) attempting to answer this question suggests the existence of certain differences among researchers, arising from the fact that some authors point to certain factors as the most important in explaining the efficiency of democratic systems. Vujčić (2001) thus states that one group of authors finds institutions and institutional design to be the most important, another one emphasises socio-economic factors, while the third one underlines socio-cultural factors.

In this paper we are interested in the influence of socio-cultural factors on the functioning of democracy. The idea that the functioning of a political community does not depend solely on the arrangement of institutions or the level of economic development, but also on the sphere in which the activity of citizens is expressed and in which fundamental political values, symbols and feelings of the community members are articulated, was already conceived in the political philosophy of Ancient Greece (Šalaj, 2007). Systematic explication and empirical testing of the role of socio-cultural factors on the efficiency of democracy was carried out by American political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in the noted study titled *The Civic Culture* (1963). With this study, Almond and Verba introduced the concept of political culture in the social sciences, which was defined as “the specific distribution of orientations towards political objects among members of a particular nation“ (21). By employing the concept of political culture, it is intended to emphasise that politics has a subjective, and not just objective basis and that the political behaviour of citizens and elites is not solely rational and interest-driven, but also rooted in traditions, customs, knowledge, attitudes, emotions, etc.

The importance of the subjective dimension of politics, i.e. the orientations of people towards political objects and processes, was detected by many other theorists and researchers also. However, some of them were using other terms to denote this domain. Thus, some introduce the notion of political literacy (e.g. Crick, 2000), while others employ the concept of political competence (e.g. Dahl, 1999 [1989]; Lupia, 2016). The concepts of literacy and competence are more often found in the analyses and studies of individual features of citizens, while the notion of political culture is more present in the analyses that compare the situation in particular countries. Given that we shall be exploring the features of students in the empirical part of the paper, in this study, we shall employ the concept of competence.

In the case of competences and literacy, it can be said that these concepts are very similar, almost functioning as synonyms, which is easily ascertained if the content of these concepts is analysed. Under the notion of political literacy Crick and Lister (1978) understand the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary for efficient participation in political life. Very similarly, Patrick (1977) specifies knowledge, intellectual abilities, participation skills

and attitudes as basic dimensions of political literacy. Many other authors follow this line of thought (e.g. Audigier, 1997; Davies, 2000; Starkey, 1986). The latter see knowledge and understanding, skills and values, as well as attitudes as three main elements of political literacy. Almost identical content is outlined by the authors that employ the concept of political competences. Thus, in their review of the literature on competences Kovačić and Vrbat (2014) argue that they are most often defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The knowledge consists of the understanding of facts and data, as well as concepts, ideas and theories that support the comprehension of a particular domain or topic. Skills are defined as the ability and potential to carry out the processes for achieving certain results, while attitudes are understood as ways of thinking.¹ For Lupia (2016) having competences implies an ability to perform certain tasks in an exactly defined way, whereby, along with knowledge, competences also encompass skills and attitudes.

Previously given definitions are very similar in how they understand the concepts of competence and literacy, especially in terms of the main content. The latter is in both cases knowledge, skills, and attitudes or values. Acknowledging such similarity, in the proceeding text we use the concept of political competence for the purpose of clarity. In doing so, and conditioned by the available data that are used in the empirical section, in this paper we shall understand political competence as a combination of knowledge and attitudes.

The first of these two dimensions, knowledge, is understood as political knowledge. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) define political knowledge as a range of factual information on politics that are stored in long-term memory. The majority of other researchers have very similar understanding of political knowledge. Thus, Milner outlines it as a set of accurate information on politics (2002: 53), Rapeli defines the same concept as accurate factual information referring to politics (2014: 2), while Cassel and Lo understand it as the knowledge of basic political concepts and facts (1997: 321). Accepting such definitions of political knowledge, Lupia (2016) gives its three essential characteristics. The first is that knowledge is a feature, i.e. an ability of memorising information on certain objects and concepts, and their

¹ Besides the concepts of political competence, contemporary literature, especially documents of the European Union and the Council of Europe, mentions the concept of civic competence. The understanding of this concept is somewhat broader than that of the concept of political competence. In it, civic participation and the realization of civil rights is more pronounced (Kovačić and Horvat, 2016). According to the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union (2018) civic competence is based on the knowledge of basic concepts referring to individuals, groups, working organizations, society, economy and culture. It includes the understanding of common European values, knowledge of current events, as well as critical understanding of main events in the national, European and world history, awareness of the aims, values and policies behind social and political movements, as well as knowledge of sustainable systems, especially global climate and demographic changes and their basic causes. Skills refer to the ability of efficient collaboration with others in matters of general or public interest, including sustainable development of the society. In this paper we are focused on a narrower concept of political competence.

mutual relations. The knowledge that someone possesses is therefore based on the remembering of previous experiences, and on their mutual connecting. The second important feature of knowledge is that it is factual, while the third implies that knowledge can exist in various forms, whereby two basic forms are further explicated. One type of knowledge, the one that is significant for this paper also, is labelled by Lupia as declarative knowledge, i.e. memory, which exists in a situation when we ask someone to recall specifically defined information, e.g. in a test, research, conversation, etc. People rely in their answers on declarative memory that encompasses the memorising of specific information or their pieces. The second type of knowledge is denoted by Lupia as non-declarative memory, by which he understands the memorising of certain skills and procedures.

All the mentioned authors believe that political knowledge is a vital precondition for reflecting on various political questions, as well as for active and responsible participation of citizens in political processes. Therefore, among democracy theorists, there is a normative consensus on the significance of political knowledge for democracy. Jarvis (2008) points out that political knowledge is an inevitable ingredient of civic competence, for only well-informed citizens make democracy efficient. Galston (2001, 2007) asserts that political knowledge is a necessary condition for the understanding of the content of public discussions, while Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) conclude that higher levels of political knowledge, besides being important for the understanding of one's political interests, contribute to ideological consistency and stability of citizens' political attitudes. Besides that, a considerable number of researchers have demonstrated in their studies a positive influence of higher levels of political knowledge on the readiness for political participation, especially regarding voter turnout (e.g. Bartels, 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993, 1996; Milner, 2002; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Wattenberg, 2007).

The second dimension of political competence, attitudes, refers to the citizens' convictions regarding the system, its institutions and functioning (Bagić, 2011a: 45). Generally, social scientists understand attitudes as “psychological orientations expressed in the evaluation of a particular entity with a certain level of affinity or aversion” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993:1). Attitudes are not something basic, fundamental, something that is hard to change, as is the case with personality traits. Nevertheless, attitudes are not as unstable and easily changeable as opinions. Unlike political knowledge for which, as has been shown, there is high consensus regarding its definition, for attitudes there is no consensus on the question of which ones should constitute the content of the democratic political competence, despite some democratically

favourable attitudes being determined in state constitutions, and some being described in documents of the European Union and the Council of Europe.

The choice of attitudes that we shall focus on in this paper is defined by two elements. Firstly, we find the attitudes in question to be very important for the functioning of contemporary democratic political systems. Secondly, these attitudes have been operationalised by identical indicators in all three research cycles, and we use them in the empirical section of the paper. In this paper we are therefore focused on three types of attitudes, i.e. we are exploring their presence among youth in Croatia. These are nationalism, authoritarianism and democratic activism.

Why did we choose exactly these attitudes? Bagić (2011a) argues that the beginning of the democratic transition in Croatia was marked by the presence of exclusive nationalism that was based on ethnocentrism. Unlike civic nationalism, which is according to Lakoff (2000) relatable to the liberal-democratic order, exclusive nationalism suggests that inequalities established based on ethnic criteria are justified and acceptable. It is clear that a strong presence of exclusive nationalism greatly hinders the functioning of liberal-democratic orders, which in their grassroots have the idea of political equality. The second type of attitudes is the one that can be labelled as authoritarian. These attitudes are important, as Bagić (2011a) suggests, due to the long-standing presence of elements of authoritarian political culture in Croatia during the periods of non-democratic fascist and communist political orders that Croatia was a part of. It was therefore important to ascertain in the present study the extent to which authoritarian attitudes are present in the young population as well, which has spent its entire socialization experience in the democratic system. Authoritarian attitudes were operationalized by the question on the freedom of association, political pluralism, and single-party dominance in the political system. The third type of attitudes, also important for the functioning of liberal democracy, can be outlined as democratic activism, and it encompasses, according to Bagić (2011a), a positive attitude of citizens towards association and civic participation in the community. The first two mentioned types of attitudes imply a situation in which their strong presence hinders or even prevents the development of democratic political culture, thereby obstructing the stable and efficient functioning of liberal democracy. For that reason, they can also be labelled as non-democratic attitudes.

Methodology and research questions

The main aim of this paper, as mentioned in the Introduction, is to ascertain the state of political competences of final-year secondary school students in Croatia. The paper is based on

data collected in the research of political literacy, whose first cycle was carried out in the spring of 2010, the second in April and May 2015, and the third in March 2021.² All three research cycles included the exploration of political knowledge and political attitudes of final-year students, while social and political participation were examined in the 2015 and 2021 research, and attitudes towards the European Union were part of the 2010 research.

Bagić (2011c) describes the process of construction of the questions that were used in the questionnaire. By analysing the content of educational programmes and handbooks, the main aims and content of the secondary education subjects “Politics and Economy“ and “Sociology“ were ascertained. In other words, the intention was to ascertain the knowledge and attitudes that are transferred to students within these subjects, i.e. those knowledge and attitudes that students should acquire in classes as the learning outcomes.

In the first two cycles, the research was carried out by employing the method of independent filling-in of the questionnaires. The third cycle was taking place during the COVID-19 disease pandemic, and the procedure was adapted in such a way that the questionnaire was transferred to the digital Alchemer service platform. The pollsters were present in the classrooms where they introduced the students to the details of the research and were willing to clarify possible doubts and difficulties, but the students accessed the questionnaire by using computers or mobile devices. All participants were granted anonymity and confidentiality of data.

All three cycles were carried out on a nationally representative sample of final-year secondary school students, in the form of a group survey of all students in the selected classes. The classes were selected by the method of random selection among randomly chosen schools. In doing so, the sample was stratified based on the type of secondary school programme attended by the students. The stratified sample encompassed three types of secondary school programmes that exist in the Croatian system of secondary education – general education, three-year vocational, and four-year vocational.³ The percentage of participating students from all of the programme types was proportional to the real share in the population of final-year students. The basis for the selection and stratification of the sample was a list of all secondary school

² The research cycles were conducted by researchers from the Faculty of Political Science and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb, the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Gong and the GOOD Initiative (Bagić, 2011b; Kovačić and Horvat, 2016; Baketa, Bovan and Matić Bojić, 2021).

³ The sample of four-year vocational secondary schools also included respondents that were attending a programme for nurses and medical technicians, which lasts five years.

classes in Croatia, which was provided to the researchers by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. Table 1 displays basic information on the samples in all three research cycles.

Table 1: Descriptive data of the sample

	2010	2015	2021
Number of classes	43	56	67
Total number of respondents	999	1146	1121
General education secondary school	288	330	331
Three-year vocational	258	301	262
Four-year vocational	453	515	528

Further on, we are focused on the parts of the research that thematised the knowledge and attitudes of final-year students.⁴ Political knowledge is operationalised as the ability of students to give correct answers to the questions encompassing the knowledge of certain facts about politics, which means that we are interested in what Lupia (2016) defines as declarative political knowledge. In all three cycles a total of 19 questions were used, whereby for each question four answers were offered, of which only one was correct. By adding correct answers to each of the questions it is possible to design a scale of political knowledge ranging from zero to 19 correct responses. It is this scale that we shall be using in the empirical part of the paper.

In the case of (non)democratic attitudes we use eight questions that were identical in their content and structure in all three examined time points. In all the cases a Likert-type five-degree scale was used, with answers ranging from “1-Strongly disagree“ to „5-Strongly agree“. Factor analysis confirmed three independent dimensions in all three research cycles: exclusive nationalism, authoritarianism and democratic activism. Following the confirmed three-dimensional factor structure, satisfactory measures of reliability were ascertained and factors were transformed into additive scales. Concerning the intention to examine the stability of political knowledge and attitudes in the ten-year period, by employing variance analysis (ANOVA) we examined whether the detected changes in the levels of political knowledge and acceptance of attitudes during the given period were statistically significant. In addition, ANOVA was applied in examining the statistical significance of the difference in political

⁴ The operationalization of political knowledge is consistent with the methodology applied in prior studies that analyzed the three databases, which contain data collected in 2010, 2015, and 2021, respectively (Bagić and Šalaj, 2011, 2016; Ćulum, Gvozdanović, and Baketa, 2016; Baketa, Bovan, Matić Bojić, 2021). These three databases form the basis of our empirical analysis in this article. However, for examining (un)democratic attitudes and the relationship between political knowledge and attitudes, we introduce original operationalizations that have not been previously formulated or analyzed.

knowledge and the level of acceptance of political attitudes with regard to the type of educational programme.

Indicator of exclusive nationalism consists of three questions that describe the social and political exclusion of non-Croats: *1) In Croatia, ethnic Croats should have greater rights than other Croatian residents; 2) Croatia should be defined by the Constitution as a national state exclusively of the Croatian people; 3) Croatian tradition is richer than the traditions of most other nations.*⁵ Indicator of authoritarianism contains three questions that describe the relation towards the freedom of expression and the understanding of political pluralism and a multi-party system: *1) In the case of important topics, the possibility that all people in the media can openly express what they think should be limited; 2) The ruling party should have absolute freedom to rule between two parliamentary elections; 3) It is desirable that one strong party dominates the political scene for a long time.*⁶ Democratic activism was measured by an indicator consisting of two questions that examine the relation towards associations and civic engagement: *1) Civil society organizations (associations) are important for the development of democracy and addressing various social issues; 2) Each one of us should take action to address social issues in their community, rather than wait for someone else to solve them.*⁷

The main research question, outlined in the beginning of this chapter, shall be thematised through three specific questions. Firstly, what were the levels of political knowledge of Croatian final-year secondary school students and have these levels changed significantly with time? We shall also inquire whether there are significant differences in the levels of political knowledge among different types of secondary school programmes attended by the students. Secondly, what were the levels of the acceptance of (non)democratic attitudes among Croatian final-year students, and have these levels changed to a greater extent with time? Here we shall also be interested in possible differences among such attitudes with regard to the secondary school programme attended by the final-year students. Thirdly, what is the dynamic of the relation between the two dimensions of political competence, i.e. what is the relationship between knowledge and attitudes in the period between 2010 and 2021?

Results and interpretation

By adding correct answers to particular questions on political knowledge, a scale of knowledge can be designed, ranging from zero to 19 correct answers. Further on, we use such

⁵ Cronbach α (2011) = 0.697; Cronbach α (2015) = 0.584; Cronbach α (2021) = 0.622.

⁶ Cronbach α (2011) = 0.550; Cronbach α (2015) = 0.490; Cronbach α (2021) = 0.551.

⁷ Cronbach α (2011) = 0.474; Cronbach α (2015) = 0.465; Cronbach α (2021) = 0.442.

a scale to present data related to students' political knowledge.⁸ Table 2 provides results for the total population of students, and for the students that attended particular types of secondary school programmes.

Table 2: Average value of the index of political knowledge and differences in the level of political knowledge with regard to the type of secondary school programme in three time points

		ANOVA				
	M (sd) of the sample	General education schools (M; 0-19)	3-year vocational schools (M; 0-19)	4-year vocational schools (M; 0-19)	F	P
2010	8.49 (3.16)	9.57	6.74	8.80	66.328	0.000
2015	9.00 (3.65)	12.10	5.73	8.72	355.211	0.000
2021	9.07 (3.40)	11.76	6.38	8.72	66.328	0.000

The data presented in Table 2 suggest a couple of important insights. Firstly, the average of correct answers for the total population did not exceed 50% in any of the time points. If observing the total population of students, this average was between 8.5 and 9.1 of correct answers, which is slightly lower than the average of 9.5, which represents a half of correct answers. What does this finding tell us about the levels of political knowledge of Croatian final-year students? Is the glass half-full or half-empty? In a lack of comparative research on the adult population in Croatia, as well as in the absence of a spatial comparative framework that would compare these results with the situation in other democratic countries, it is hard to assert unambiguously that the levels of political knowledge are either low or high.

However, the second insight indeed is unambiguous. The data presented in Table 2 suggest very high levels of stability of the levels of Croatian final-year students' political knowledge. Although it has been five and more years between each research cycle, whereby the first and the third are separated by a ten-year gap, the total level of political knowledge has changed very little. Thereby, the differences among the levels of political knowledge with regard to the time point of measuring are not statistically significant.⁹ This applies to the total population of respondents, and to those who attended particular types of secondary school programmes. We previously argued that it is not easy to ascertain whether the levels of political knowledge of final-year students are high or low, however, the presented data clearly suggest that the situation has not changed for the better. This is definitely not a positive insight,

⁸ Statistical manipulations included univariate (distribution of answers) and bivariate analysis (correlations and variance analysis) to determine the correlation between two dimensions of the political competence (knowledge and attitudes) and the correlation of particular dimensions of the political competence and the type of the school programme.

⁹ $F = .198$, $p = .820$

especially considering the expectation that the development and duration of the democratic political order would lead to the development of the democratic political culture, whose integral part is political knowledge. Such expectation did not come true in the case of Croatian final-year students.

The third, exceptionally important, insight is the one on pronounced heterogeneity of the levels of political knowledge with regard to the type of the secondary school programme attended by the respondents. Such heterogeneity exists in all three time points. In all cycles, students of general educational programmes showed the best knowledge, followed by those attending four-year vocational schools, while students of three-year vocational programmes achieved the weakest results. The students of three-year vocational programmes answered correctly to a significantly smaller number of questions on average than their general education counterparts. In the first time point, they answered correctly to almost three questions less than the general education students, whereas in 2015 and 2021 the latter scored double points on the political knowledge index, compared to three-year vocational school students. The students of four-year vocational schools achieved results that are between the ranges of the two previously mentioned groups. All the differences are statistically significant.

The analysis of three research cycles confirmed the previously stated partial assessments (Bagić and Šalaj, 2011, 2016; Ćulum, Gvozdanić and Baketa, 2016) on substantial differences in the levels of political knowledge of final-year students with regard to three types of secondary school programmes. All three research cycles confirmed that the educational process in Croatia forms two groups of future citizens. The first have solid levels of political knowledge, which should enable them to participate in political processes in a relatively competitive way. Additionally, given that they are mostly students that attended general education programmes, it is to be expected that most of them shall continue to upgrade that knowledge by proceeding to further formal education. Unlike that, the second group consists of students with low levels of political knowledge. Regarding that they dominantly attended three-year vocational schools, these students shall mostly lack the opportunity to fill the gaps in the political knowledge by continuing formal education.¹⁰ Considering all the arguments, we

¹⁰ The papers that were based on data from the previous two cycles (Bagić and Šalaj, 2011, 2016; Ćulum, Gvozdanić and Baketa, 2016) confirmed an exceptionally strong influence of the type of the educational programme also through regression analyses, in which the contributions of other factors such as gender, point grade average, parents' social background etc. were controlled. The school programme type has in this case also emerged as the most important predictor of students' political knowledge. However, here also the research exploring the Croatian situation need to be mentioned (e.g., Burušić, Babarović and Marković, 2010; Gvozdanić et al., 2019), in which a strong correlation between educational achievements of children and the educational level of the parents was established. Thus, the children of parents with higher levels of education will be more successful

completely agree with the assessment given by Bagić and Šalaj after the second cycle of research: “Such results strongly indicate the necessity of establishing a unique programme of youth political education, to prevent the educational system from further replication of differences in the competences of future rightful citizens, instead of performing the function of annulling the differences with which students enter the system“ (2016: 79).

In the second step of the analysis, we focus on students' attitudes. We employ scales of nationalistic and authoritarian attitudes and the scale of attitudes towards democratic activism, which were described in the previous section. Table 3 provides results for the total population of students and for the students according to the type of school programme, regarding the presence of nationalistic attitudes.

Table 3: Average value of the scale of nationalism and differences in the acceptance of nationalistic attitudes with regard to the type of the secondary school programme in three time points

		ANOVA				
	M (sd) of the sample	General education schools (M; 0-19)	3-year vocational schools (M; 0-19)	4-year vocational schools (M; 0-19)	F	P
2010	3.12 (1.01)	2.96	3.41	3.05	15.818	0.000
2015	2.67 (0.90)	2.33	2.91	2.76	37.356	0.000
2021	2.45 (0.85)	2.10	2.66	2.57	44.091	0.000

It is not easy to unambiguously interpret results from single time points as either high or low. We therefore focus on the question of changes that happened with time and on the comparison of various types of secondary schools. The good news is, viewed from the perspective of the democratic political culture, that the average acceptance of nationalistic attitudes among Croatian final-year students has reduced significantly in the observed period. Specifically, the acceptance of nationalism among final-year students is in each generation after 2010 statistically significantly weaker.¹¹ The weakening of nationalism was detected in all respondents, regardless of the school type. However it has to be noted that the presence of such attitudes has mostly eroded among general education students. As in political knowledge, when analysing the presence of nationalistic attitudes, there are significant differences among final-year students of different school types. In the first time point, students of three-year vocational schools express higher level of nationalistic attitudes than other students, and in the remaining two time points there are significant differences among all types of schools. In both cases, final-

in school and enroll in higher education, while the children of less educated parents will more often choose vocational education. This way, existing social inequalities are reproduced, rather than reduced by the Croatian educational system.

¹¹ $F=114.836$; $p<0.001$.

year students of general education programmes are least prone to nationalistic attitudes, followed by students of four-year vocational schools. The highest presence of such attitudes was detected in students of three-year vocational school programmes.

Table 4 displays results for the total population of students, and for the students who attended particular types of secondary school programmes, with regard to the presence of authoritarian attitudes.

Table 4: Average value of the scale of authoritarianism and differences in the acceptance of authoritarian attitudes with regard to the type of the secondary school programme in three time points

		ANOVA				
	M (sd) of the sample	General education schools (M; 0-19)	3-year vocational schools (M; 0-19)	4-year vocational schools (M; 0-19)	F	P
2010	2.88 (0.81)	2.68	3.18	2.83	27.672	0.000
2015	2.74 (0.86)	2.38	3.10	2.77	58.588	0.000
2021	2.53 (0.83)	2.21	2.85	2.58	49.362	0.000

In 2010 and 2015, final-year students were moderately prone to expressing authoritarian attitudes, while in the generation of 2021 a trend of the weakening of an inclination towards such attitudes can be observed. In other words, the presence of authoritarian attitudes among Croatian final-year students follows a pattern that was established for nationalistic attitudes. Here also we have a positive trend of the reduction of the presence of authoritarian attitudes, which is also visible on the total sample and in all types of schools. The positive trend is somewhat weaker than when it comes to nationalistic attitudes, i.e. the decline of the presence of authoritarian attitudes is slightly lower than in the case of nationalistic attitudes. Nevertheless, the generation of final-year students of 2021 is statistically significantly less prone to accepting authoritarian attitudes, compared to the previous generations of 2015 and 2010.¹² In addition, the pattern of distinguishing between final-year students of particular school types is the same as in nationalistic attitudes. There are significant differences among all school types in all three time points, whereby final-year students of general education programmes are the least authoritarian, followed by students of four-year vocational programmes. The highest presence of authoritarian attitudes was detected in students of three-year vocational schools.

Table 5 provides results for the total population of students, and for the students who attended particular types of secondary school programmes, with regard to the presence of democratic activism.

¹² $F=30.076$; $p<0.001$.

Table 5: Average value of the scale of democratic activism and differences in the acceptance of democratic activism with regard to the type of the secondary school programme in three time points

	M (sd) of the sample	ANOVA				
		General education schools (M; 0-19)	3-year vocational schools (M; 0-19)	4-year vocational schools (M; 0-19)	F	P
2010	3.78 (0.87)	3.85	3.69	3.78	2.071	0.127
2015	3.87 (0.75)	4.11	3.62	3.85	34.502	0.000
2021	3.81 (0.75)	4.02	3.53	3.82	32.676	0.000

Unlike the previous two types of attitudes, in the case of the level of acceptance of democratic activism, there are no statistically significant changes.¹³ Still, it needs to be mentioned that positive attitudes towards democratic activism eroded to a certain degree among students of three-year vocational schools in the observed period. Additionally, in the first time point we did not detect significant differences among particular school types, but we did find them in the last two time points. This is an already established pattern of differentiation. The students of general education programmes mostly express attitudes that support democratic activism, i.e. democratic political culture, followed by students of four-year vocational schools, and finally those attending three-year vocational programmes.

In the last step of the analysis, the results of which are given in Table 6, we examine the relationship between the levels of political knowledge and acceptance of particular types of attitudes.

Table 6: Correlations of the index of political knowledge and scales of Croatian final-year students' attitudes in three time points

		Nationalism	Authoritarianism	Democratic activism
Political knowledge	2010	-.14**	-.31**	.25**
	2015	-.25**	-.37**	.30**
	2021	-.17**	-.34**	.22**

**p<0.001

All correlations given in Table 6 are statistically significant and point to the expected correlational direction. Higher levels of political knowledge are negatively correlated with the higher presence of nationalistic and authoritarian attitudes, and positively correlated with a benevolent relationship towards democratic activism. This correlation is in all three time points the strongest in the case of authoritarianism, and the weakest in the case of nationalism. If we accept the assumption that the relationship between knowledge and attitudes functions

¹³ F=2.157; p= .116.

primarily through the influence of knowledge on attitudes, and not *vice versa*, then such results have clear implications for socialization and education. The increase in the levels of knowledge has a positive influence on the reduction of nationalistic and authoritarian attitudes, and on stronger acceptance of democratic activism. Indeed, a complete confirmation of such conclusions would presume testing of regression models, in which we would also examine some other determinants of the presence of these attitudes, which is nevertheless beyond the scope of this paper.

Discussion

In this part of the paper, we aim to address two questions that we consider important for a better understanding of the current state of political competences among final-year secondary students in Croatia. The observed levels of their political competences are not impressive. However, this may be plausibly attributed to their emergent role as voters and their relatively limited experience in active political participation. Therefore, it presents a compelling question to explore whether individuals in their early to mid-twenties develop greater political competence as they progress into university life or embark on their professional careers. Indeed, youth studies in Croatia indicate that high school students demonstrate weaker political and social competences compared to other socio-professional subgroups of young people, such as employed, unemployed, and university students (Ilišin et al., 2013; Ilišin and Spajić Vrkaš, 2017). This is particularly noticeable in their weaker endorsement of certain democratic principles and a lower propensity for socio-political participation. High school students disproportionately lack a clear preference for the political system, wavering between democratic and authoritarian options, which suggests uncertainty in their political beliefs (Ilišin and Spajić Vrkaš, 2017). They also tend to have difficulty defining their ideological positions on the political left-right spectrum (Ilišin et al., 2013). Moreover, their support for democratic values, such as a pluralistic party system, adherence to the rule of law, and gender equality, is less pronounced compared to university students (Ilišin and Spajić Vrkaš, 2017). In general, high school students exhibit a weak interest in politics, followed by a reluctance to engage in political and social activities, such as joining political parties or participating in volunteer organizations and youth associations, unlike other socio-professional youth subgroups (Ilišin and Spajić Vrkaš, 2017).

Another important question pertains to the possible causes of the current situation. How can we explain the findings regarding the political competence of Croatian final-year secondary students? A comprehensive and precise answer requires separate research. Still, at this point,

we aim to highlight a fact that should undoubtedly be regarded in potential future analyses. As of 2023, Croatia remains one of the few European countries where civic education, understood as an integral part of the educational system designed to equip young people with the political competences necessary for an active role as citizens, is not institutionalised and implemented in primary and secondary schools in a systematical and high-quality way. Civic education was officially introduced in primary and secondary schools as a cross-curricular topic in 2014, and subsequently, it became one of seven cross-curricular topics in the new national curriculum (Ministry of Science and Education, 2019). These topics are supposed to be integrated into all teaching subjects, but no one is specifically in charge or trained for implementation, nor is the implementation adequately monitored and evaluated.¹⁴ This opens a new question about the reasons for the existing neglect of civic education in Croatia. The reasons are probably multiple and complex. However, we agree with the thesis (Kekez, Horvat and Šalaj, 2017; Šalaj, 2018) suggesting that one of the main reasons is the lack of political will, i.e. unwillingness of the Croatian political elites, both left and right-wing, to make a decision on the systematic implementation of the civic education program in Croatian schools. In a situation where the primary factor of socialization, the educational system, fails to adequately contribute to the development of a youth democratic political culture, the previously presented state of youth political competence in Croatia should not come as a surprise.

Conclusion

The previously presented results can be summarised into three main points. Firstly, the research conducted with Croatian final-year students suggests that it is plausible to employ the concept of political competence with the dimensions of knowledge and attitudes. These two main dimensions of competence, for which we assumed in the theoretical part that they make an integral whole, are significantly correlated in all three time points. Higher levels of political knowledge are positively correlated with the lower presence of nationalistic and authoritarian attitudes, and stronger acceptance of attitudes related to democratic activism. The strongest correlation was found between knowledge and authoritarian attitudes, and the weakest between knowledge and exclusive nationalism. It is an insight that should be regarded in possible future

¹⁴ At the same time, the local governments try to bridge the lack of opportunities for students' civic education by developing their own optional subjects and extracurricular activities (Šalaj, 2018). Although these initiatives have proven to be a useful response to the needs of students and the lack of civic education on the national level, only a small percentage of students is included in this model of education depending on organization and local resources. The challenge persists that through this model of organization civic education is available only to a part of the students and depends on the resources of schools and local governments.

interventions in the educational process, for it suggests the type of attitudes that are hardest to change by upgrading the level of knowledge. Future research should explore the extent to which the dimension of skills, i.e. the related patterns of the current and future civic and political behaviour of youth, can be incorporated into the concept of political competence. This would potentially clarify an intriguing finding suggesting that the weakening of nationalism and authoritarianism is not accompanied by an increase of political knowledge. Despite a significant correlation of political knowledge and attitudes in the ten-year period, the stability of the level of political knowledge is not reflected in the stability of (non)democratic attitudes. In that sense, further analyses are needed that would possibly reveal significant determinants of the rejection of non-democratic attitudes. The latter would provide an even more complete picture of the socio-cultural presumptions of democracy among youth in Croatia.

Secondly, as we already mentioned, it is hard to assert unambiguously whether the presented results suggest, from the perspective of the democratic political culture, a satisfactory situation or a reason to be concerned about. An unambiguous categorical conclusion would suggest that there are clearly defined standards of a minimum level of political competence among researchers and in the literature, based on which assessments could be made. For now, there are no such standards, as Lupia (2016) warns, too. Therefore, the obtained results need to be interpreted with regard to a spatial or temporal comparative framework. In this paper we have done so by comparing the results in three time points. Probably the most important insight is the one on the very significant stability of the levels of knowledge and attitudes during the whole observed period. Although Croatia went through many changes, such as the EU accession, multiple changes of political authorities, a couple of attempts of educational reforms, etc., in the period from 2010 to 2021, which is covered by the research, the levels of knowledge and attitudes have changed very little. This applies particularly to knowledge, whereby the fact that the average of correct answers for the total population did not surpass 50% in any of the measured time points is not the reason to be happy about. The situation is somewhat better with attitudes, especially with exclusive nationalism, whose presence declined in the observed period. Still, the total results suggest that the thesis that the development and duration of the democratic system, i.e. democratic institutions and institutes, shall lead to a stronger development of the democratic political culture has not become true.

Thirdly, probably the most devastating insight for the future development of the democratic political culture in Croatia is the one regarding the great differences in the levels of political competence among students of particular types of secondary school programmes. This primarily applies to students of three-year vocational schools who, compared to other students,

have significantly lower levels of political knowledge and significantly stronger presence of nationalistic and authoritarian attitudes. This finding was also confirmed in the papers that used data from the first two cycles, and is now ascertained also for the 2021 data. Regarding that among the total number of secondary school students in Croatia, between 25 and 30% attend this type of schools, it would be expected that the educational authorities would pay particular attention to this population, and that they would strengthen the contents from social sciences and humanities in such schools, particularly the civic education programmes. It is paradoxical, and tragical at the same time, to see announcements of the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, the competent authority for the curricula and programmes of three-year vocational schools, according to which the new curricula for this type of schools shall have a drastically reduced number of lessons of subjects from the domain of social sciences, and the subject “Politics and economy“ shall be completely removed (Lilek, 2023).

Each individual enters the social and political life of the community as a political *tabula rasa*, and during the maturation period the society “writes“ political messages on him/her. This socialization process is a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon, taking place both in democratic and non-democratic societies, nevertheless essentially differing in its content. Democratic societies should enable young people through the maturation and education to take the role of active citizens. The research presented in this paper suggests that the Croatian society has not given enough attention to this goal.

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