8 Talking about Civic Engagement: "The Dirty Game of Politics"

In this chapter, I will show how the interviewees talk about becoming engaged with the Yisra'el Beitenu party.

Enjoying full political *rights*, I assumed it was unlikely that the interviewees had faced legal barriers—in various empirical studies this is referred to as political opportunity structures (e.g. Fanning/ O'Boyle 2010; Fanning et al. 2010; Bloemraad 2006)—to become engaged; and the interviewees do not mention any legal restrictions either.

However, previous empirical studies on the civic engagement of immigrants show that they need a certain degree of adaptation to the host society in order to have access to culture-specific resources. In this context, de Rooij concludes immigrants become engaged in less -time and cost intensive areas (de Rooij 2012: 459). With regard to the participants in the current study, this does not apply: as listed above, the interviewees engage in a variety of forms of civic engagement, most of them in their spare time. However, with regard to Fanning and O'Boyle's description of a particular "socio-political habitus" (Fanning/ O'Boyle 2010), which is not necessarily related to migration, the interviewees can add their own experience.

The second question is, however, how the interviewees strategically apply their power resources in these stories, i.e. how they present them and for which purpose. Civic engagement takes place within the political field (e.g. Bourdieu 2013), which is close to the field of power and directly subordinate to the latter.

Thus, one may assume that people who are actively engaged with a political party, which, additionally, is legitimised by being part of the

government, speak about their relation to the execution of power. And the interviewees do, yet, not predominantly speak in terms of personal influence, but with regard to *serving a community*.

8.1 ANALYSIS OF POWER RESOURCES II: ROLE MODELS

The empirical findings presented above already suggest that the participants in the present study have compensated the lack of some forms of power resources—relative to the host society's—at their disposal throughout the length of their stay. However, it also shows that the interviewees as individual members of the social group differ a) in the composition of their resources based on the individual mixture of collectively shared and individual predispositions, experiences and their individual processing, and b) in the emphasis on different aspects.

One of the aspects receiving particular emphasis in this context are individuals, usually in their families, who serve the interviewees as role models. Generally, the family plays a minor role in the narratives. The interviewees speak about their civic engagement in terms of individual achievement. One reason may be that most of them are adults, and have left home for studies or work, and thus there are other people outside the family, peers, who are close to them.

When the interviewees do speak of their family, they usually refer to their home as supportive and involving good relationships with their parents providing a particular atmosphere of trust, respect and support in the family. This atmosphere does not necessarily have to be political, but it usually provides the interviewees with a sense of belonging. Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder describe a similar relationship between the participants in their study and their parents; the family is also the place where a sense of belonging, in particular the knowledge of being Jewish, is cultivated (Rapoport/ Lomsky-Feder 2002: 239).

With regard to their civic engagement, most of the interviewees emphasise the support they have received at home. At the same time, some interviewees speak about family members who serve them as role models. The fact that the interviewees bring up family members who serve them as role models for civic engagement is in line with Torney-Purta and Klandl

Richardson's finding (2004) who show that the way in which political issues are brought up in the core family has a positive impact on the children's or adolescents approach to civic engagement. This is particularly true for the interviewees' grandparents. Both, Avi and Katya, speak of their grandparents as citizens who actively defended the values they believed in, yet in different ways. Avi's grandfather was a writer back in the Soviet Union, and at times censured; he continued writing occasional articles for one of the local Natserat Illit newspapers after his immigration to Israel. Avi describes a close relationship with his grandparents, in particular his grandfather, whom he visited as often as possible after his mother's remarriage (see above). One possible reading of Avi's story is that his grandfather serves as a father-substitute for his grandchild. Yet, the important thing for Avi is that his grandfather "raised me in a Zionist mood" (Avi, p. 21), and continues *serving* as a moral authority in Avi's head:

"Something sits in my head, and this is disturbing me, I tell you the truth, that there is a situation that I will leave this country, like [...] the moment that I already see, ehm, that really is, like, if I had kids, or if I had already, ehm, some economic basis, and I see that this is not, it doesn't move anywhere [...] if my grandfather would hear me now, auwa, 'what, are you crazy?!', he would say, 'what happened? You will stay here, this is the country, this is the country, what happened? If everybody talked like that, what will be? Nobody would stay here!' He is right, so this maybe comes from home, too" (Avi, p. 19).

Katya's grandmother—Katya states the two have many discussions as she also lives close to her granddaughter—is a similar moral guidance. Katya observes similarities of her own life with that of her grandmother's: both share the experience of serving in the military—her grandparents were both partisans (Katya, p. 9)—and being politically interested: "she knew everything about politics, so it was simply impossible, impossible, ehm, even to argue with her" (Katya, p. 12). More than with her mother, Katya talks with her grandmother about these experiences. Interestingly, in this context the reference to the Knesset as one of the centres of political power (see above: Sabras) returns in Katya's story. Katya tells me how "proud" (Katya, p. 12) her grandmother was when she started working there as a parliamentary assistant. The Knesset in her narrative, just like in Igal's, is more than merely a workplace, it is a symbol of power.

Against this background of success, Katya claims to prefer "Russian-speaking" (Katya, p. 38) over referring to herself as "Russian", adopting the hegemonic discourse just like other interviewees refer to themselves. Her family's history as well as her own achievements so far are for Katya a resource for gaining self-esteem and symbolically preserve her "culture" over completely adapting to the Israeli mainstream. Accordingly, Katya reflects on her *sense of belonging*:

"[Being Russian is] nothing to be proud of, I, it's, it's, it's a part of me, it's a part of my culture, a part of [what defines] me, I, I can't live—I am not proud of it, because to forget my past is, is, is bad, it means what, what does it say about me, yes my grandmother was, my grandparents were, they were soldiers in the Soviet army, (..), and my mother grew up there, and my father is still there, so what, I'll forget all of this and say 'no, I am not, not Russian, and I want to forget all this?' It's wouldn't be right, and also, also you see that I come from this background, and people also tell me this explicitly: 'one can see that you, that you, that you are Russian', yes, my way to dress, [...] it is a matter of growing up." (Katya, p. 5)

This adds another layer together with her argument of being Jewish (see above). Katya's identity of being a "Russian-speaking" Israeli is carefully constructed and reflects a long process of fighting and coping.

In contrast to grandparents who give some of the interviewees a general compass or *sense of belonging*, politically engaged mothers have a direct impact on their children's political orientation. Two other participants, Igal and Lukas, talk about the influence their mothers' active engagement has on their own activities: both had been recruited by their mothers and helped them organise local activities in the framework of IB. But the interviewees' recruitment was not the starting point, rather do those interviewees reflect on the fact that they have learnt to see the world through their mother's eyes in a long-term socialisation process. As Igal puts it:

"[T]he whole family shares the same political attitude, an attitude which originates of course [...], my mother gave this attitude, my mother planted this attitude into us, now, my mother comes with a certain talk, so we simply continue to talk like this, there is no argument, because we all believe the same way, we can't argue, argue about what, you understand? [But] I love arguments, I get crazy to sit with an Arab and talk with him about the state of Israel: 'to whom does this country belong, to me or to you?', I

always do that, always—, the thing is that because—, of course, I respect the person that I stand up against him, but because my education is a little bit higher than his, in this specific subject of course, yes, no doubt about that, he has higher education than I do in many subjects, but in this specific subject—, so we start to argue, in the end when I get into some ecstasy, when I get excited, he simply stops talking. Because he doesn't know, he doesn't know, and this is exactly what happens here, educated people know what happened in the world, and they know what happened in this specific country in the course of the year, and these Palestinians that are born now, those children don't know, they simply don't know where they live, they live at war with Israel, so they simply fight Israel, why do they fight Israel, they don't know, they don't have a clue, they are told that the Israelis took the territories from them, this is not true, they don't know that, and they don't care, this is what their mother told them, me on the contrary—if my mother had a different attitude, I —, everybody tells me, 'Igal, you are influenced by your mother', the truth is, yes, I am not ashamed of that." (Igal, p. 25-6)

Igal implies that his mother's strong opinions have not left any room for alternative political views. But his statement also illustrates that he is not interested in hearing alternative political views when he has the opportunity to engage in discussions with people who think differently but is absolutely convinced his mother's opinions are a historical truth he must spread. Igal's conviction can be explained with his positioning in Israeli society: in order to present himself as a Sabra, Igal can adopt the extreme right political discourse in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict he has been instructed in at home.

8.2 ANALYSIS OF DISCURSIVE PRACTICE II: "IT […] COME[S] NATURALLY"

In this section, I will show how the interviewees talk about their motivation to become engaged. In their empirical study on party activists, Bruter and Harrison (2009) identified three different types of activists: moral, social and professional-minded ones. All three of those can be found among the participants in the current study. Yet, some interviewees consider it more important than others to talk about the source of their motivation: a particular community.

Looking back to the beginning of his engagement, Max, a member of the Knesset for the Yisra'el Beitenu party at the time of the interview, claims it was "natural" for him to become engaged:

Interviewer: "Did you talk about politics at home, with your mother and grandmother?"
Max: "No, there are things that come naturally, there are things that you do not discuss and do not, not (...)—well, my mother, she is a teacher of Russian language and literature, she, she helps me with other issues which on a certain stage I need advice upon in order to decide whether to proceed or not. Why? Because—if a person takes a decision that yes, he is going to run for office, maybe. When decisions are taken— to help the weak—when decisions are taken—to become engaged with an NGO—I think it is worth it to have some discussion in the family, [whether] 'yes' or 'no'. It [informal engagement] should come naturally—there is spare time, there is time that one can give to support others—it should come from inside a person, not like he is [discusses whether] 'yes' or 'no'. Why? Because you cannot make plans about these things, impossible to say 'I start here and finish there', that is why—it is such a huge change of your life once you start—in the end, yes, it crosses your mind that you spend more and more time—in the beginning it should come naturally, if somebody starts to do that, he should like it, not like he forces himself or feels obliged before someone else. That is how I see it, I do not see anything special in this, something that needs to be discussed at home, to do or not to do—in the beginning at least." (Max, p. 21-2)

The motivational source, as he describes it ("it should come from inside a person"), is not something acquired during one's socialisation process, it is a character trait. Max is striving to present his engagement coming entirely from inside against the background that he has particular qualities, "leader qualities".

But at the same time, he states his motivation to become engaged involves the feeling of moral obligation as a citizen, an internal predisposition which is learnt ("it should [my emphasis] come naturally"). Accordingly, he makes a qualitative distinction between different forms of civic engagement: every citizen should become engaged in their communities, and those who have particular character traits, should start political activities. Expressing the feeling of such a moral obligation involves a more or less abstract social unit towards whom this obligation is felt, and

indeed, the community is a common reference in the narratives. The community involves different contexts or levels of abstraction. It can be the interviewees' concrete social environment; community in these cases is related to "issues in everyday life" and concrete personal experiences. Some interviewees state their active engagement has been motivated by a pressing issue in their community (cf. Haste/ Hogan 2006). Max and Ben for instance have become engaged in their college student's councils, a rather temporary and random community.

Yet another group of interviewees state they have become politically engaged as a consequence of recent events, i.e. because they were upset because of something in the news (cf. ibid.). In this context, the so-called Gaza flotilla of the summer of 2010 is of particular interest. There were literally dozens of demonstrations to show support to the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) every weekend in the course of the event. Zeev decided to help organising spontaneous demonstrations on behalf of the IDF in his school.[1] Zeev states he felt obliged to publicly express solidarity with the IDF and organised pupils' demonstrations on Fridays in his hometown Haifa: "It's important to show support to the IDF, we did well [what we did in Gaza], we are at war with them [i.e. the people in Gaza]" (Zeev, p. 14). Igal adds: "every Israeli wants to support [IDF], every Jewish Israeli" (Igal, p. 15).

Another local event was the discovery that Natserat Illit's mayor was corrupt in 2009. Igal, like Avi a student of media and communication at the nearby Jezreel Valley College, talks about how his mother—the representative of the Yisra'el Beitenu party in the Knesset—took the lead in local demonstrations with him helping her with the organisation. While in the case of demonstrations in Natserat Illit, community occupies a concrete space and people, the city or the city's inhabitants who feel upset about their mayor, pro-IDF demonstrations take place against a rather abstract conception of community. Against the background of these statements, community is directed toward a more abstract *sense of belonging*, an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006 [1983]). In Zeev's and Igal's cases, this community–"we"–is that of Jews.

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1   The IDF is seen as apart from the government, and support for the former is still high (Arian et al. 2010; Ben Meir/ Bagno-Moldavsky 2010)—in contrast to support for the latter (Arian et al. 2010; Ben Meir/ Bagno-Moldavsky 2010).

Sometimes is the idea of community refers to a specific local context or particular personal encounters; this particularly concerns participants from Natserat Illit. Avi tells me he was upset about what he perceives as social problems the local, in particular immigrant youth in Natserat Illit suffers from. He explains his motivation to become actively engaged with his personal experiences:

"I went through a lot, now I am here, and I said [to myself], I have already grown up from the same processes being 16, 17, and I see that the young people here need, and I speak to you basically about Russians." (Avi, p. 4)

Community in Avi's case then implies an emotional attachment to a certain group based on concrete shared experiences—here: a common migration background. In his case, emotions of grief, frustration and anger cause him to feel responsible. In this context, Avi's story suggests a feeling of social responsibility, a moral obligation to become engaged when facing problems in his community. Yet Avi also emphasises that he wants his engagement clearly understood as community work, not political activities: "I didn't want [to mix my activities with politics] until now, if you like, it's fine" (Avi, p. 11). Katya, on the other hand, states that her community work only started when she began to work for a political representative. She tells me how excited she was when she returned from her job interview, having found out that her potential future position was more than "being a secretary":

"Maybe this sounds like hypocrisy, but, ehm, when I came to the job interview [...], and [the MK] began to tell me about the work, I began to understand that this is not just about being a secretary and not just, ehm, to answer telephone calls, that doing that work I can find other tasks for myself, I drove home and all the way back I couldn't listen to radio nor anything else, I arrived at home, and just said to my mother: 'Mom, I, you don't know how much it is possible to really help people at this work, and you simply don't believe', [...] ehm, it, it, it, it brings such a huge feeling of satisfaction (4), this is not hypocrisy, I really told her this, she was shocked and told me: 'this is what you are thinking about when you want to enter politics?'." (Katya, p. 8)

Accordingly, she describes her job as that of a "legal advisor" rather than that of an "assistant" and, consequently, as if she was actually working in a

legal office, like her father wanted her. Avi's and Katya's community is not the temporary one which Ben refers to. Both show concern about the immigrant community of "Russians"; thus, it symbolises emotional attachment. By referring to her social group and stating that in her job she is able to help, Katya manages to reconcile her own decisions with her father's expectations, and thus to re-establish the good relationship she claims that they have. Furthermore, in order to justify her staying in her current position before him but also before herself, Katya returns to her father's warning but turns it into an argument in favour of her involvement in politics—gaining actual power:

"[Y]ou can actually change something—the moment I say that I am calling from an MK's office [...], [a]nd that is why I chose, right for now, to accept that [being engaged with the Yisra'el Beitenu party], because I also want to learn the rules of the game." (Katya, p. 8)

Katya even risks her good relationship with her father about her political engagement and tells me about the "exhausting argument" with her father: "[A]lways remember that this is politics and that this, simply can, can simply be as not, not, not, not so much white and pure as you may imagine it" (Katya, p. 9). Katya's father, who stayed in Russia after her parents' divorce, warned her about the "dirty game of politics" and at the same time made her understand that he expected her to become a lawyer like himself and Katya's grandparents (Katya, p. 3). Accordingly, the argument is not so much about the specific party but about political activity in general. Scepticism about politics in general and involvement in particular is quite common among post-Soviet citizens, and consequently among the respective immigrants in Israel (Ben Meir/ Bagno-Moldavsky 2010; Arian et al. 2010; Bagno 2009). Katya understands and partly shares her father's concerns about her professional future and a stable income and also that she might "get hurt in the dirty game of politics".

However, in the narrative she emphasises the advantages, i.e. the contribution to her community she will be able to make ("it is possible to really help people at this work"), over possible disadvantages or negative personal outcomes. However, the narrative also reveals an instrumental form of motivation, namely that of making a political career. The line of Katya's argument at that point is also of a strategic nature. In her story about the job

interview she tells me it was important for her to finally have found a job after a considerable time of unemployment. Katya does not share her parents', here her father's, scepticism about politics but rather looks at the job opportunity pragmatically. Talking about her current position from a backward perspective, she states she would like to "learn the rules of the game" (Katya, p. 4) and therefore meanwhile accepts to work in politics in general and for the Yisra'el Beitenu party in particular.

The game metaphor also occurs in other interviews, in particular when it comes to the resources one needs to play this "game". This can be social connections necessary to enter that "game", i.e. people who function as gatekeepers, but also particular skills like the ability for representation or impression-making on others.