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Digital Civic Cultures in Post-socialist South Eastern Europe

Fabio Ashtar Telarico

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ДИГИТАЛНА
ГРАЖДАНСКА
КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТ И
МЕДИЙНИ
СТЕРЕОТИПИ

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ДИГИТАЛНА ГРАЖДАНСКА КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТ И МЕДИЙНИ СТЕРЕОТИПИ

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СЪДЪРЖАНИЕ

ВЪВЕДЕНИЕ

РАЗВИВАНЕ НА ДИГИТАЛНА ГРАЖДАНСКА КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТ В ОБУЧЕНИЕТО Деспина Василева	7
СОЦИАЛНИ СТЕРЕОТИПИ И ИНДИВИДУАЛНИ ЕСТЕТИЧЕСКИ НОРМИ Психологическо измерване на „избора по предпочитание“ Ивайло Панов	29
АСПЕКТИ НА ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО 3.0 В КОНТЕКСТА НА ДИГИТАЛНАТА ГРАЖДАНСКА КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТ Ани Ангелова	43
КАКВО МОЖЕ ДА БЪДЕ (СЪЩЕСТВУВА ЛИ) „ПЕРЦЕПТИВНА ИНТУИЦИЯ“? Мозъчните полукълба като нелинейни динамични системи Ивайло Панов	53
РАЗВИВАНЕ НА ГРАЖДАНСКАТА КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТ ЧРЕЗ ПРОЕКТНО ОРИЕНТИРАНО ОБУЧЕНИЕТО В ГИМНАЗИАЛЕН ЕТАП (8.-12. клас) Стойка Чакърова	59
РАЗВИВАНЕ НА ДИГИТАЛНА ГРАЖДАНСКА КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТ ЧРЕЗ ИНТЕРАКТИВНИ МЕТОДИ В ОБУЧЕНИЕТО Десислава Нейкова	69
ЗА ГРАЖДАНСКИТЕ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТИ НА УЧЕНИЦИ ОТ БЪЛГАРСКО НЕДЕЛНО УЧИЛИЩЕ Мая Падешка	81
DIGITAL CIVIC CULTURES IN POST-SOCIALIST SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE Lessons, prospects and obstacles after thirty years of media (il)literacy in the region Fabio Ashtar Telarico	95
АСПЕКТИ НА МЕДИЙНАТА ГРАМОТНОСТ В ОБУЧЕНИЕТО (С ОГЛЕД НА ОБУЧЕНИЕТО ПО БЪЛГАРСКИ ЕЗИК) Деспина Василева	109

DIGITAL CIVIC COMPETENCE AND MEDIA STEREOTYPES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL CIVIL COMPETENCE IN TEACHING

Despina Vasileva

SOCIAL STEREOTYPES AND INDIVIDUAL AESTHETIC STANDARDS

Psychological measurement of "preference choice"

Ivailo Panov

ASPECTS OF EDUCATION 3.0 IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL CIVIC COMPETENCE

Ani Angelova

WHAT COULD BE (DOES IT EXIST) "PERCEPTIVE INTUITION"?

The Cerebral Hemispheres as Nonlinear Dynamic Systems

Ivailo Panov

DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL COMPETENCE THROUGH PROJECT-ORIENTED EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOL (Grades 8-12)

Stoyka Chakarova

DEVELOPING DIGITAL CIVIL COMPETENCE THROUGH INTERACTIVE TEACHING METHODS

Desislava Neykova

ABOUT THE CIVIC COMPETENCE OF STUDENTS FROM A BULGARIAN SUNDAY SCHOOL

Maya Padeshka

DIGITAL CIVIC CULTURES IN POST-SOCIALIST SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

Lessons, prospects and obstacles after thirty years of media (il)literacy in the region

Fabio Ashtar Telarico

ASPECTS OF MEDIA LITERACY IN TRAINING (WITH REGARD TO BULGARIAN LANGUAGE TRAINING)

Despina Vasileva

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DIGITAL CIVIC CULTURES IN POST-SOCIALIST SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

LESSONS, PROSPECTS AND OBSTACLES AFTER THIRTY YEARS OF MEDIA (IL)LITERACY IN THE REGION

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Abstract: Before being analysts, scholars, practitioners, bureaucrats or policymakers most of the people on this planet are 'citizens'. Even those who do not hold any citizenship are somehow affected by the scope of the non/agenda of the State they live in. Therefore, discussions on the cultural features of citizenship as a proactive contribution to States' functioning should not constitute a niche interest or an esoteric matter. In the case of South-Eastern Europe, political cultures' standing at the intersection of culture and politics is of extreme interest. This chapter provides some useful definitions to reads the current state of citizenship's development in SEE: What is the cultural legacy of real socialism? What was the impact of digitalization? What is e-citizenship? Finally, it argues that States need to provide media- and information-literacy for their citizens to be effectively and willingly engaged.

Key words: political culture, post-socialism, digitalization, civic culture, South-Eastern Europe

Introduction: Citizenship duties and rights in the 2020s

Before being analysts, scholars, practitioners, bureaucrats or policymakers most of the people on this planet are citizens of a State (or more States). Even those who do not hold any citizenship are somehow affected by the scope of the non/agenda of the State they live in. Therefore, understanding the means through which people proactively contribute to States' functioning (i.e., citizenship) is but a niche interest or an esoteric matter. Nevertheless, the discussion requires some theoretical depth insofar as the ever-evolving technology of the 2020s is pushing all sorts of societies to levels of polarisation never reached before. This essay explains the complexities laying behind the label digital civic culture in post-socialist South Eastern Europe (SEE) through a self-reflective exercise of social analysis. The hinderances along the way are numerous and, obviously, there is not enough space to endeavour to search all answers. Nevertheless, some of the issues one may want to take with digital civic cultures in SEE can be grouped in two rather homogenous clusters according to their role in the social process in question.

First, to use a metaphor, the historically-determined cultural legacy of post-socialism 'set the stage' in which political life still takes place in SEE. Then, the main actors take their places: the mutually-reinforcing interactions of culture and politics. Attempting to carry out a 'culturalist' analysis, the text explores the social-science literature on political culture (from Sartori 1987; to Poster 2006; and Miller 2020a; 2020b; 2020c). Consequently, the notion of citizenship is problematised with a marked focus on the possibilities of developing a so-called "civic culture" (Almond and Verba 1963) in SEE. As many researches in the realm of social sciences, this chapter contends with the 'lexical question' of endowing its main conceptual referents with meaningful conceptual boundaries. In doing so, it takes up the challenge of fixing unstable signifiers'

sense at the present time, manifesting no pretence to formulate a 'definitive' enunciation. Then a new actor joins the cast: the trend towards digitalisation and the variegated spectre of technological breakthroughs it encompasses. This fact has been playing a key role in the evolution of both politics and the information system (Leandros 2006; Grunig 2009; Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns 2010; Denig 2017) since the 2000s. In the post-socialist world more than elsewhere, digitalisation has catalysed—as well as altered—underlying tendential socio-cultural transformations already visible on the long durée. SEE is no different from the developed world in that today being a politically active often starts on—and, sometimes, revolves entirely around—the internet (Vegh 2003; Lewis, Gray, and Meierhenrich 2014). Such a shift into the digital world makes the internet and social media essential for protest and the citizenry's civic engagement more broadly (Hands 2010; Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, and Bimber 2020; Baltadzhieva 2021).

Yet, despite their apparent immediateness, the skills required to contextualise someone's rant on Facebook are quite diverse from those needed to comprehend a journalist's thoughtful blog post. In turn, these differ from those necessary to read between the lines of a politically-correct Tweet or deciphering a leading politician's Instagram feed. Moreover, all of these capabilities bear little to no resemblance to basic literacy and daily-newspaper reading (Kress 2003; Livingstone 2014; Vraga and Tully 2019; Tully, Vraga, and Bode 2020). Thus, a reality of progressively-growing rates of over-information (Weingart 1982) leaves social scientist with the need to elaborate new theories. But, more importantly, it burdens pedagogists and educators with the duty to find new ways of making of societal culture a worthy counterpower to a self-contained politics. Even more so, in SEE and other peripheral areas of the globes where digitalisation took longer to root and—in the absence of a real civic culture—practices of e-citizenship have yet to mature (Bottomore 1992; Borgida et al. 2002; Couldry et al. 2014).

The following three sections analyse political cultures' stand at the intersection of culture and politics each dealing with the following problematic nodes and their interrelations: (1) the historically-determined cultural legacy of post-socialism; (2) digitalisation and the emergence of e-citizenship; (3) the need to provide media- and information-literacy for citizens to be effectively engaged. Further researches may focus on others aspects (e.g., the digital divide or the specific working of social networks) and/or explore different paths of extrication in order to bring on contribution from different (disciplinary) perspectives.

§1 Post-socialism, culture legacy

1 Thinking 'post-colonial' about the post-socialist

In the 1990s, Western social scientists coined the terms 'post-communist' and 'post-socialist' to summarise the unsteady situation following the end of real socialism. For quite some time, this terminological dualism has implied a methodological bifurcation. In a sense, these labels could better be understood as two different—yet not too clearly distinct—perspectives on the same object.

Post-socialism's peculiarity lies in rejecting the notion of linear transition, counterarguing in favour of the idea of transformations made up of "rearrangements, reconfigurations, and recombinations that yield new interweavings of the multiple social logics that are a modern society." (Stark and Bruszt 1998, 7) Against a monotone interpretation of social change and any linear vision of a path from (real) socialism to (free-market) democracy, scholars of post-socialism tell the stories behind a plurality of

singular experiences (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008) and Habermasian life-worlds. From this perspective, structural transformations are just “elements in a massive political and ideological upheaval that is by no means restricted to the ‘East’,” (Verdery 2014, 38) or limited to politics and economics. Yet, many often ignore that by relinquishing power national Communist Parties (CPs) opened wounds and left scars in the hearts and the minds of many no less than in their livelihoods.

Henceforth, SEE social worlds are analysed assuming 1989/1991 as an epochal rupture²⁷—similarly to how post-colonialism looks at non-Western societies in terms of their ‘having been colonial’. In effect, real socialism has left such deep traces that post-socialism can be considered a conceptual peer to post-colonialism (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008 suggest to ‘think post-colonial’ about post-socialism). In effect, both strive to define “societies by something they are not. Instead of what they are” (Kideckel 2003). Yet, the post-socialist is not a mere transposition of the post-colonial on the Eurasian landmass. A number of discrepancies emerge, including the fact that decolonisation was prevalently endogenous and it reduced external actors’ direct influence²⁸. On the contrary, the changes of 1989 were equally revolutionary, but grassroot only in appearance. For instance, in Russia, first the “the way in which the USSR was dissolved” in 1991, then the tanks sent to bomb the parliament in 1993 brought to the CP on its knees (Shevtsova 2007, 15–16). In Bulgaria, it was a coup that actually deposed Todor Zhivkov on November 9 (Melone 1998). At the same time, “it is clear that members of both party elite and the army used the urban demonstrations [...] to stage a coup d’état” in Romania (Ramet and Wagner 2019, 16). Finally, the ensuing semblance of a movement towards free-market democracy was incentivised (Linz and Stepan 1996; Mitra and Selowsky 2002; Shields 2014) and subsidised (Ottaway and Carothers 2000; McFaul 2005; Vachudova 2006, 19ff; Aslund and McFaul 2006) by the West. The declared aim was to bring about new freedoms and opportunities through mass consumerism. But these endeavours ignored extant institutions and habits, thus leading to the dilemma of “double” and “simultaneous” transitions (Sztompka 1991; Armijo, Biersteker, and Lowenthal 1994; Centeno 1994).

One last word before adventuring deeper into the details of the discussion on the cultural legacy of real one-party rule in SEE. No matter how heuristically powerful the label post socialism is considered to be, it is only meaningfulness insofar as its meaning is not regarded as ‘set in stone’. In fact, ‘being post-socialist’ encompasses an ever-changing list of attributes as well as ways of thinking, behaving and communicating. Thus, the category’s contents need to keep mutating as both endo- and exogenous factor propel changes in “the culturally evolved expectations of ways of behaving” and “getting things done” (Hammond, Gerot, and Wignell 1992).

2 How many post-socialist cultures?

Using ‘culture’ as a synonym for customary and traditional behaviours would suffice only for a most superficial analysis. It is rather a “super glue” providing a “patterned way of doing things” (Kwast 1981, 397). These blueprints refer to “the different notions that men possess, to the various opinions that prevail in their midst, and to the set of ideas from which the habits of the mind are formed.” (Tocqueville

²⁷ Thus, there is a not-so-implicit privileging of 1989/1992 as a historical moment which lead to focus on socialism as one of the dominant forces in determining the social structure—rather than, say, imperialism or capitalism.

²⁸ Albeit a vast phenomenon, colonisation was broadly unpopular with local populaces (Mamdani 1996; 2018), explaining the capability of local elites educated in the West to mobilise the mass against colonial oppression (Hunt 2016, 264).

1848, 198 [bk. 2, pt. 12, chap. 9]) In other terms, cultures dictate behaviours reflecting the dominant values of a society; that is to say the

'pre-set' decisions that a culture makes between choices commonly faced. It helps those who live within the culture to know what 'should' or 'ought' to be done in order to 'fit in' or conform to the pattern of life.

(Kwast 1981, 398)

At all echelons, culture appears to be “contingent” (Rynkiewicz 2002, 301) on “a mapping of the values and ethical premises which are [its most] dynamic elements” (Sankar 1988, 9). Obviously, societal choices change and evolve, leading to the accumulation of “invisible” elements such as “moral principles, religious traditions, rules of the game, social habits” (Almagisti 2007, 16). In its dynamism culture is, therefore, “historical because it involves change as well as continuity, creation and discovery of novelties together with the assimilation of traditions.” (Bidney 1944, 37)

Addressing cultures after real socialism with the prefix ‘post-’ carries the risk of reifying the culture of real socialism into some sort of a uniform experience that it never was (Szelényi 2015). Thence, one needs to acknowledge real- and post-socialism’s intrinsic pluralism. Before 1989, real socialist’s political reality has accommodated a variety of different cultures: the Baltics never resembled the rest of the former Soviet Union, Czechia and Slovenia, differed from Poland or Hungary²⁹. and SEE was always a different story. Each ‘real socialism’ interacted with local cultural contexts taking the shape of “obvious national varieties”, notwithstanding which “fundamental, underlying commonalities” remained (Sztompka 1993, 87). Acting as a “peculiar culture-generating setting of vast scope”, the Eastern bloc grafted specific rules of conduct, sets of values and a distinctive semiotics on pre-extant cultures creating a bloc culture “typical for the bloc as a whole” (Ibid.). The need for a pluralistic view is reinforced by the acknowledgement that “just as communism produced similar contexts, so leaving communism successfully has a similar list of preconditions”. (Bunce and Wolchik 2006, 297)³⁰.

Nevertheless, post-socialist cultures share more than a fading common past. At different times and tempos—and with unequal results—they all underwent the often-traumatic transplant of the Western “risk society” (Beck 1992). Modern capitalism’s fertile cultural-ground was a nefarious exogenous influence. Where local conditions were unfavourable, uncertainty was compounded by the “consumer mass culture of lowest quality [which always] arrives first” carrying irrationalism, drug addiction, ruthless criminal enterprises and other “deviant ways of life.” (Sztompka 1993, 90) As the new context “offered unbridled possibilities for consumption and for individual advancement”, past pre-sets like “modesty, solidarity and equality” became a liability (McFalls 1995, 159). Far outweighing the effects of supposed “Balkan mentalities”, “Roma natures” and “fatalist orthodox souls” (C. Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery 2002, 8), risk society traumatised collective consciousness. Moreover, real-socialist States were also social States. The sudden shift to a risk-based society engendered passive resistance and, at times, even “a nostalgia for the security and stability they enjoyed behind the Wall” (McFalls 1995, 163).

²⁹ These latter two countries are labelled “zombie-socialist” in a provocative study (Chelcea and Druță 2016).

³⁰ Estonia (Bennich-Björkman 2007) and, to a lesser extent, in Czechia and Poland (Tolstrup 2013) were the ‘right’ contexts.

3 Political cultures at the intersection of culture and politics

Studies on the relationship between, on the one hand, culture and, on the other, political systems and constitutional regimes has led to many conflicting definitions of political culture. Being historically-determined and contingent as every sector of culture, political culture is not

an uncaused cause purportedly explaining why people behave as they do yet incapable of itself being explained. [Thus, one needs] to conceive of culture not only as mental products (ideas, values, beliefs), as is commonly done, or as patterns of social relations, but as values justifying relationships indissolubly bound together.

(Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 2014, 508)

So, building on Kwast's (1981) definition, political dictates behaviours in accordance with pre-set choices as to what is 'customary', 'obligatory' or 'good' in politics. The values on which political culture operates cannot diverge from those of culture as a whole. Hence, interpersonal trustfulness is indispensable for institutions—from the central government to the smallest, most peripheral court of justice—to function correctly and effectively. (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1977; Putnam 1994; 2000)

On this basis, one could approximately identify two levels on which culture alters political action:

- (a) limitingly, by fixing constraints and imposing taboos—In limiting terms, a 'political culture' is an "empirical belief systems, expressive symbols and values that define the context in which political action takes place". (Almond and Verba 1963, 3)
- (b) productively, with the sense of producing corps dociles (Foucault 1975; 2004b; 2004a) or broken bodies by "destroying health and earning capacity" (Johnston and McIvor 2004, 135)—A political culture is productive when acting as a form of "[s]ocial memory or reservoir of underpinnings and resources reinforcing sheer force, whose actual or virtual use only partially guarantees the regulation of the political order." (Schemeil 1985, 237)³¹

Clearly, such a dualism evokes an element of uncontrollable variability in individual beliefs and experiences. Yet, this hinderance can be bypassed by accepting only a "little allowance for variation in trust among individuals within societies" while highlighting "the homogenizing tendencies of national traditions" (Mishler and Rose 2001, 32). After all, usually a coherent "dominant political culture" (or its core principles) is shared across social classes, denominations, ethnicities and sexes in each society (Lipset 1960, 77; Frenzel-Zagorska 1985, 78–79; Sodaro 2004, 258)³². The production of a political subject with limited degrees of freedoms provides individual political action with an orientation in three domains (Almond and Verba 1963, 14). Basically, they contain "knowledge and trust in the political system" (cognitive orientation) and cultivate "feelings and expectations about the political system" (emotional orientation). At the same time, they allow people to express common-sense "judgments and opinions

³¹ Whereas not otherwise indicated, all quotes from non-English sources were translated by the Author.

³² One of the explanations for the contrast between internally-homogeneous political cultures and significant cultural cleavages is that in complex societies "overlapping memberships reduce the salience of the inevitable differences within society and thus produce a basically homogeneous political culture." (Lijphart 1971b, 5)

on political matters” combining the former two with their own personal experiences (evaluative orientation).

As a brilliant writer once noted, “culture has become [...] a department of politics” (Eliot 1949, 83). Hence, intra-societal cultural cleavages shape politics (cf. Rokkan 1970; Rivera 1996; Mahon 1998; Ignazi 2013; Gjukovikj 2018), but politics may attempt to bridge these very divides (Lijphart 1971a; 1999; Horowitz 1999; 2003; 2014). In this dialectical relation, the dominant political culture is not simply formal rules’ “underpinnings”, but also the driving force behind their evolution. Such a thrust is determined by a society’s “axiological capital”—defined as the ‘excess’ of its limiting effect (culturally-determined duties and constraints) on the written rules of the political game (cf. Sartori 1979, 145–50).

Thus, the civic culture is the citizen’s political culture, one that is peculiarly suited to democracy (Almond and Verba 1963, 117). A political culture’s ‘civic-ness’ is manifest in its capability to push the finish line of democracy’s consolidation always a bit forward in the endless pursue of liberty, safety and happiness—to steal the words of the US’s Declaration of Independence. In a sense, there is a sort of cat-and-mouse game in which formal prescription seem to chase the political culture—no matter if the latter is more or less stringent. In this race, real- and post-socialist cultures ultimately ‘cap’ the quality of democratic governance in SEE. More often than not, the race is here one ‘to the bottom’, with culture (almost) never setting the bar higher than the threshold marked by laws and regulations.

§2 Digitalisation and the emergence of e-citizenship

The emergence of new technologies and their—admittedly slow—embrace in the region poses no small challenge (De Magny 2003; Várallyai, Herdon, and Botos 2015; Negreiro 2015) pose a challenge to the attempted sketching of sensible and rational analyses. Digitalisation has not just catalysed the structural symbiosis between post-socialisms’ specific problems and risk society’s uncertainty, but is likely to have altered its outcome. The ways in which civic-ness is enhanced by the internet and their relevance to post-socialist SEE are the topic of this section.

1 The condition of the post-socialist citizen

Before proceeding forward, the relation between citizenship and civic culture should be elucidated taking into account the latter’s two dimensions:

nationality and citizenship proper. The former is a purely legal [...] which has to be respected by other states according to [...] international law. By contrast, citizenship proper defines the role of the individual as a competent member of the polity, that is, as a person who due to his and her rights and duties participates actively in the formation of the political will and the significant decisions of the polity.

(Preuss 1998, 88)

Clearly, only *active citizens* who believe that “the ordinary man is expected to take an active part in governmental affairs, to be aware of how decisions are made and to make his views known” (Almond and Verba 1963, 119), enjoy a ‘full status’. In this sense, a democratic political culture is ‘civic’ because it bears the marks civic virtue: “a perceived moral obligation to serve the *common good*, especially the interests of a

‘community’ in which individuals and/or groups are connected.” (Hess 2016, 925 emphasis added)³³

Within this framework, the judgment on post-socialist political cultures ought to be ‘insufficient’ due to their civilisation incompetence (Sztompka 1993; 1996)³⁴ and the derived fatalist familism. Making individuals care about public life is the ultimate aim of capital-letter Democracy. Such an effort’s “home is the neighborly community [...] in local, face-to-face associations” (John Dewey quoted in Westbrook 1993, 314). Only through a free association do ideas “take a clearer and more precise form [...]. The association brings together divergent minds’ efforts, and vigorously pushes them towards a single goal it clearly indicates.” (Tocqueville 1848, 31 [bk. 2, pt. 12, Chap. 4]) But post-socialist SEE’s civil society is feckless—and even the internet seems unable to ‘straighten’ it. The “assimilation of foreign funds” has tuned Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) suffering the schizoid declaration of “left ideas” and their neo-liberal concretisation in the “highest-grossing business” in town (Krasteva 2011, 88).

Without worthy associations, SEE witnessed a “widespread retreat into [...] private space” which came “both as a reflex [...] and as a result of [popular] disappointment with the outcome” of the “daring venture into public space” of the 1990s (McFalls 1995, 163). Forms of “nostalgic fatalism” and strong “feelings of anomie” hinder participation even amongst younger generations to this day (Ådnanes 2007). These societies’ dominant political cultures go beyond taming. They rather seem to aim at breaking men and women by convincing them that “providence, or destiny, or chance, or impersonal political forces” have already set the course of the events (Sztompka 1993, 91). Looking at politics in good faith seems against common sense and a waste of energy. As a result, the “the virtues and moral resources of flexibility, of patient waiting, of deliberating, probing, and weighing one’s short-term vs. long-term and individual vs. collective preferences” have never taken root. (Offe and Adler 2004, 521)

With the fall of real socialism, CPs’ “political oppression and persecution, ferocious and often gory cultural crusades, thought control and casting all opposition as heresy and political crime” (Bauman 1991, 190) came to an end. Yet, whereas “society has freed itself, [...] in some ways it behaves worse than when it was in chains”. (Havel 1992)

2 The civic culture goes online—e-Citizenships

Since 2001, developed countries’ governments have taken “concrete actions to facilitate access to information and participation, raise awareness, strengthen citizens’ civic education and skills as well as to support capacity-building among civil society organisations.” (Gramberger 2001, 88) Advanced democracies were fast to recognise that digitalisation was a game changer, adopting a number of informatic tools for information, consultation and active participation. Building on what precedes, the internet seems to be of pivotal importance in nurturing the civic-ness of the dominant political culture. In fact, the web offers a number of channels serving pre-filtered information to the final user (Christians et al. 2009; Ward 2010)—and knowledge is the base of a strong cognitive orientation. Digital media are culturally powerful and politically relevant in that they can establish bounds, generate belongings, and uphold

³³ On the role of community organisations see the next sub-paragraph.

³⁴ Piotr Sztompka (1993, 88 [typos in the original]) defines “civilizational competence” as the “complex set of rules, norms and values, habits and reflexes, codes and matrixes, blueprints and formats — the skillful and semi-automatic mastery of which is a prerequisite for participation in modern civilization.”

collective values through mechanisms that people “see as the unique aspects of virtual communities.” (Mersey 2009, 358)

In the developed world that the extant civic culture can leverage the internet to give culture a head-start in the abovementioned cat-and-mouse game. Such is the essence of e-citizenship, defined by the Council of Europe as the

competent and positive engagement with digital technologies [...]; participating actively and responsibly (values, skills, attitudes, knowledge) in communities [...] at all levels (political, economic, social, cultural and intercultural); being involved in a double process of lifelong learning (in formal, informal and non-formal settings) and continuously defending human dignity.

(CoE 2017)

In other words, when States invest enough resources, the internet allows civic-ness to grow even stronger by “fostering community networks and encouraging active citizenship [though ...] new opportunities for civic networking. (OECD 2003, 64)

Online participation also offers a number of advantages that are peculiarly relevant to SEE. For a start, online participation requires less resources than real-word activism. Since one does not even have to get out of his house (or office), “the cost of participation online is generally much lower than traditional civic actions” (Y.H. Lee and Hsieh 2013, 2) Moreover, ‘fighting for the common good’ with a keyboard or a smartphone, under a nickname and behind a screen can win the aversion to risk proper of non-participatory political cultures such as those of post socialisms.

3 Post-socialist political cultures go online—Liquid citizenships

The failure of e-citizenship in post-socialist Europe leads to consider the internet’s negative feedback on less-than-civic political cultures. A clear, centralised guidance of the individuals’ political engagement in the virtual word is impossible if institutional trust is low. Such a virtual anarchy is no less consequential than the suppression of real-life external control in the 1990s. Where no institution kept the digitalisation of political culture in line with the requisites of civic-ness, the virtual political landscape has become more and more parcellated. People have start withdrawing into smaller and smaller groups that bear no resemblance to Tocqueville’s civically-virtuous associations. (Telarico 2020b, fol. 38)

It is not difficult for wit political entrepreneurs to organise groups which putatively aim at the ‘common good’ while actually working in the interest of a small elite (cf. Goldberg 2013). After all, the idea of common good is culturally and discursively established in a “doxic relation to the social world [...] through misrecognition of arbitrariness” (Bourdieu 1977, 168). Thus comes the proliferation of a number of opinion groups and information universes thrusting people into sect-like communities that over-expose their members to opposing views (Bail et al. 2018) or suppress them (J. K. Lee et al. 2014). Thus, people turn into the exact opposite of an e-citizen. They are made to regress to an autistic state in which they are unable to communicate across groupings. The dominant political culture’s cognitive orientation falls to abysmal level, people fail to accept alternative views and, eventually, extremise their positions.

Unlike the US (Schier 2016; Demszky et al. 2019; Longhurst 2020), post-socialist political e-cultures have not reached this quasi-apocalyptic scenario yet. Here, the shift to the virtual world was accompanied by the establishment of a liquid citizenship (in the sense of Bauman 2000) resting—at best—on an embryonal form of more-developed

societies' civic cultures. The latest outbursts of popular ire³⁵ confirm that even groups that organise online display a "total lack of ideas that are either innovative or oriented towards the future" (Habermas 1990). In the 2020s as in the 1990s, "[m]ass activism focuses on defense against real or imagined infractions of freedom, on opposition and contestation, rather than on positive, constructive contributions" (Sztompka 1993, 91). Real- and digital-world activism does little or nothing to debilitate the perceived dichotomies between the morality of private life and politics' corruption, the nostalgia for the past and present dissatisfactions, or the oppressing feeling of unchangeability and the desire for a better life. If anything, the web has opened the door to international conspiracies and their re-adaptation in idiosyncratic local contexts.³⁶

§ 3 Media- and information-literacy for online and offline citizens

Digital citizenship does have the potentiality to foster societal integration (Bottomore 1992). New digital civic cultures may even renew that integrative force that made social citizenship (Marshall 1992) the hallmark of 20th-century social democracy. One path to that end passes through the "concerns over generally low levels of democratic participation [which] have led to significant curricular development in citizenship education." (OECD 2003, 65) As a living entity culture change with generational alternation. Schools have an important role in educating young people who "should shoulder real responsibilities, not to have a role confined to addressing the needs and interests of exclusively young people." (Sakil et al. 2015, 71) Arguably, the introduction of civic education may contribute to re-invigorate civic-ness, strengthen extant participatory tendencies (cf. Hagen 2000) and, perhaps, even suppress anti-democratic elements. However, the school system alone cannot face this challenge—and there is wide-acknowledgment in the developed world of the fact (UK Government quoted in OECD 2003, 66).

Post-socialist contexts pose specific challenges to bureaucrats, educators, the media, policymakers and laymen alike, raising the stakes in the risky game of digitalisation for SEE's already-weak democracies. Old and new media, the educational system and lifelong learning can cooperate to enhance media- and information-literacy (Staff et al. 1998; Livingstone 2004) in the region. Once the region's 'liquid' citizenship is solidified, to expurgated the most-diffused approach to civic engagement of some hindering legacies will be much easier. However, such an outcome is not granted. Embattled by one or the other crisis almost unceasingly since the fall of the Berlin Wall, only a few post-socialist countries have developed a truly 'civic' digital political culture.³⁷ If a civil society ready to renounce foreign funds (as NGOs do, e.g., in Russia - cf. Davydova 2021) does not emerge, the region seems to be headed towards a 'Hungarian scenario'. Whilst well-educated, globalised urbanites mostly oppose illiberal governments, rural areas' poorly-educated populace languishes in misinformation, magical thinking and conspiracy-theory self-delusion alimented by media illiteracy and lack of acquaintance with digital media.

³⁵ (On Serbia see: BBC na srpskom 2020; and Amnesty International 2020; on Bulgaria see Telarico 2020a; and Gulyashki 2020; on Belarus see Nechepurenko 2020; Kubilius 2020; and Borges and Holroyd 2020)

³⁶ Bulgaria is a forerunner in this sense (see books such as Siderov 2003; or posts on Facebook and numerous popular blogs—e.g., podlupa 2012)—the Ataka party's success in the 2005 elections has shown political consequences are yet to be fully evaluated. (Telarico 2021)

³⁷ Amongst them, Slovenia (Žilic et al. 2011) and Estonia (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, and Reinsalu 2009) have the most tech-savvy governments in terms of *e-citizenship*.

True, similar syndromes afflicts democracy with different political cultures: from the ‘civic’ France and UK to Egypt and Brazil, passing through Italy, Poland, the US and even south-east Asia (Rachman 2018). By creating a number of small communities that struggle to communicate, the internet is exasperating cultural heterogeneity by suppressing overlapping membership’s moderating effect.³⁸ Especially where the dominant political culture—however thin its content is getting—disincentivises active citizenship, online participation may end up replacing real activism. The daily over-exposition to a number of opportunities to ‘act digitally’ can decrease real-world activities that have historically made a difference in the development of both politics and culture. This last two tendencies affect especially younger generations. In the post-socialist context, the ultimate result in the enhancement of the already-extant feeling that nothing can ever be changed. The first never-socialist generation has both inherited its parents’ nostalgia and begun to write a new chapter in which “aspirations for a future career reflect [...] a positive and progressive mentality.” (Ådnanes 2007, 49) They envy the comforts and the wealth associated with a ‘West’ imagined in “an undifferentiated, stereotyped way, as a synonym of freedom, affluence, social security and all imaginable virtues.” (Sztompka 1993, 91) Sooner than expected, existential dissatisfaction and large-scale self-victimisation may supersede any qual against a return to more authoritarian forms of rule.

In lieu of a conclusion: A call for new theories and practice of democracy

No definitive conclusion can be draw on such an unstable matter. It seems that “civic networking will not realise its objective” (Tsagarousianou, Tambini, and Bryan 1998, 13) and Europe’s post-socialist societies will not develop an e-citizenship before having established solid civic cultures. To accelerate such an outcome is no easy task—nor can its feasibility be taken for granted. Social scientists can contribute with an analysis of what hinders civic-ness. New studies may confirm the theoretical positive impact of institutional initiatives spreading the media- and information-literacy tools to bridging off- and online participation. However, it is with pedagogist and educators—like the ones whose contributions are gathered in this volume—that the responsibility to find out *how* to keep democracy alive rests.

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³⁸ See footnote 31 above

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