SOCIALLY NETWORKED POLITICS IN ACTION: YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT RECONSIDERED

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In the broadest sense, the concept of political participation defines the state-citizen relationships, and indicates social practices bridging citizens with the realm of the 'political'. It signifies any actions private citizens take to be involved in the decision-making process, affecting their everyday social lives. Contemporary democracies face a wide range of problems concerning participation issues – crisis of legitimacy, decline of traditional forms of political participation, and decay of mutual trust and understanding are the ones most often discussed. Nevertheless, the idea of participation itself is still strongly related to the notion of a contemporary Internet-driven society. Individual involvement, digital connectedness, and technology-enabled linkages through time and space result in social networks or solidarity bonds, which change micro-interactions between individuals, as well as influence the macro-level institutions. Contradictory as it may seem, this fusion describes the existing setting for the discussions about online-based opportunities for political participation, especially when we talk about youth activism.

Within this framework, young people can be distinguished as a very special group – highly influenced by the Internet, captured by extended alternative information spaces, eager to use less formal, more open channels for interaction, but, on the other hand, tending to stay disengaged with political issues and ignorant of traditional forms of participation. This decline of active support for conventional forms of political participation leads to the erosion of traditional, institution-driven citizen participation on the one hand, and urges people to look for new types of network-based alternative public involvement strategies on the other. With the rise of the Internet, the notions of *participation*, *communication,* and *media* mix and mingle, creating new models for action, restructuring channels for political mobilization, and introducing new dimensions for political activity. These individual, many-to-many micro-actions are the appealing alternatives for young citizens – due to the generational shift in values as well as technological skills and interest in innovations, young people are not only the ones participating, but also those who are creating such platforms. However, the role of proactive young citizens, who are ICT-literate, have new media skills, and understand the global dimension, is still underestimated.

When considering proactive youth political participation practices, several aspects have to be reassessed: societal transformations leading to the importance of the topic, young subactive agents as actors in the political communication process, and the contributions of those youth-developed and supported actions in the broader democratic perspective. Non-governmental socially networked democratic engagement projects online – public deliberation forums, *Facebook* groups, alternative e-voting tools, online-centered information databases for public use and other do-it-yourself (DIY) information sources, such as blogs or other websites – are the

playground for the young and active addressed here. Such platforms not only signify new channels for political interaction, they also indicate a new political culture, where citizens are empowered through simple and direct ways for democratic engagement, via digital means, to deliberate, get more information on a government's actions, submit initiatives or write petitions, track their members of Parliament or contact them online. These activities, albeit still minor in number, create a mix of engagement alternatives illustrating the contemporary flux in political communication, and end up being a thought provoking phenomenon.

The macro-dimension describing the influential transformations in a society point to the contemporary mediatized, fluid, individualized and atomized society, described as late modernity, second modernity, or liquid modernity (Beck, 1996; Bauman, 1999; Giddens, 1991). 'Life politics' describes the political process, dedicated to the politics of individual style and a transformation of self, connected to subjective life experiences and concerning "political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies" (Giddens, 1991: 214). Politics narrows down to public confessions, public displays of intimacy and public examination, showing these personalized ways to share intimacies are preferred methods of 'community building' (Bauman, 2000). According to Inglehardt, this cultural turn reshapes "the social basis of political conflict, the reasons people support political parties, the kinds of parties they support, and the ways in which they try to attain their political goals" (1990: 5), resulting in an overall shift to postmaterialist values. Living in the conditions of stability and material security people tend to invest more in the quality of their lives, environment, democracy, or human rights. Such value shifts are positively associated with the younger generations and result in alternative political activity, where citizens (especially youngsters) tend to prioritize the values of belonging, self-expression, self-fulfillment, or intellectual or aesthetic satisfaction more than values of physical and economic security. As the Internet intrudes on everyday life more intensely and deeply, these cultural transformations are even more obvious, and different forms of engagement withdraw the definition of what is 'political' outside the habitual perception (for discussion see Beck, 1994; Dahlgren, 2003; Fenton, 2010).

These macro-level transformations run deep, influencing the notion of political participation activities. Traditionally, normative civic prescriptions emphasize the institutionalized conventional forms of political engagement (such as voting, party membership, financial support for the political organizations), which are most often oriented top-down and described as primarily physical activities. Due to the above-mentioned challenges, formerly hierarchical and institutionalized social movements transform into transient, fragmented and pluralistic structures – 'new social move-

ments' – organized as new forms of collective identity engaged in discursive struggles (Garrett, 2006). Actually, these online projects or formations (due to the informal nature and structure it is complicated to call them organizations) reflect the coevolution of a third sector in connection with interactive technologies, and consequently take the role of 'democratic intermediary spaces' between citizens and government (Wright, Coleman, 2012). Searching for ways to influence political systems, young activists go beyond the strategy of reinforcement and take on the role of 'democratic intermediums', the role once enjoyed solely by traditional NGOs or political parties. These new forms of political organization may be reconsidered using the notion of subpolitics (Beck, 1996), where individual agents find new niches for activity, not only addressing the government agencies directly, but also altering them via the implementation of the non-institutional, bottom-up projects and issue-centered initiatives, thus the citizen-politics relationship becomes extremely text-centered, i.e. based on the media texts that citizens choose to approach and engage with. In addition to the conventional perspectives, these projects echo the ideals of networked governance and are usually non-linear, non-hierarchical and fluid in nature, involve varied social actors, operate in non-governmental environments beyond just the anti-institutional and revolutionary actions (e.g. demonstrations, protests, boycotts, etc.) that used to signify unconventional forms of political participation.

This process of mediated mobilization is located within the framework of social activity and described by the microcontributions of individual agents: actors are motivated by individual grievances, rely on their own skills, participate on an as-needed basis, and lack any full-blown commitment (Garrett, 2006). Alternative activist media alter dominant ways of communication from below by creating and cultivating interpersonal networks online and making claims for autonomous spaces of participation – free from ideology, based on discussion, deliberation and sharing of ideas, leading towards radical participatory democracy. Consequent to this subactive and post-materialist nature of the online political participation, a practical field of action is formed as 'parallel communicative spaces' – places mostly small-scale, networked and collaborative in scope, but subcultural and deliberative in nature (Balčytienė, 2012). Described as alternative, independent, innovative (mostly online) media projects, such spaces emerge at the boundaries of the conventional mainstream media. They create the information flow and serve as the platforms to ensure citizen mobilization around certain issues. Expanding this concept further, we may turn to a whole range of other microactive spaces working as networks, deliberative spaces or citizenship mobilization tools, where youngsters play a significant role.

In this perspective we have to recognize not only the opportunities, but also discuss the cultural aspects of civic agency that young actors experience. One of the greatest illusions associated with youth political participation in general is the belief that the

so called 'digital generation' will join politics (or any other activity) as soon as it goes online. It might be appealing, but after decades with the Internet we still talk about these changes as yet to be seen. Nevertheless, digital mediatization of the mobilization process portrays the 'otherness' of political involvement, with specific 'citizen identities' internalized. Sharing, tweeting, posting and re-posting, pressing "like", signing petitions or forming online groups – all these actions may signify at least some political message and mobilization at the same time. The participation itself became subactive – minor, civic-oriented, implemented not in relation to state but to causes or issues (Bakardjieva, 2010). The phenomenon of subactivism – "small scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame and remain submerged in everyday life" (Bakardjieva, 2010: 134) – locates the participation in the private sphere: micro-interactions and conversations. Within the cultural perspective, subactivism describes the internal motivations for young individuals' public activism, reflecting multiplicative and enriched everyday practices of citizenship in addition to formerly organizational or strictly political layers.

We may say that, despite the appealing "democracy to everybody" idea, the Internet is not the universal cure for the decline in participation discussed in the beginning of this paper. The Internet may reinvigorate youth civic life by increasing access to political information, facilitating political deliberation, or offering an alternative venue for political expression and engagement, but these claims have contra-arguments – social media, socially networked platforms and other online tools may also create a mix of fragmented activities, generating participation without real outcomes, so politics become wider and denser for those already engaged or interested, and stays nearly non-existent for the excluded, and the questions of control, power, information management, and colonization become distinct as never before. Moreover, the numbers of those joining and participating are not high; the access to technology is unequal. Despite the concerns (or maybe in spite of them), the need for more in-depth studies aiming to understand the dynamics of the complex socio-political participation issues together with the subject of youth engagement still remains. The discussion may target various questions: what is the value of socially networked (online) political participation tools used for the purposes of political mobilization? What kind of activist networks do those tools create? What is the role of young movement entrepreneurs in creating those online projects? What do those sociotechnical environments say about the political participation habits of the young? May it be called subactive experiences? Finally, may these distinctive spaces created by the non-governmental sector possibly become a salvation for the weakening conventional sphere of political participation and set up parallel communicative spaces, connecting the online world with "real" policy-making?

The conclusion, preliminary as it is, reveals the real dilemma of transformation in the socially networked politics – on the one hand, these platforms and projects are niched, minor, and attract only particular audiences, but on the other, changes are most evident not in numbers, but in content, and is an interesting illustration for transformations in the 'political' as well as changes in alternative and unconventional youth social activism online. On the whole, insights presented here are just a few of many gates to enter the diverse and complex issue of youth online engagement, bringing attention to the formerly underestimated or even completely new counter-spaces online.

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