



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 33/14

Project manager: **Maria Bakardjieva**

Project title: **New Media and the Dynamics of Civil Society in the New EU Democracies: Retooling Citizenship in the Baltics and the Balkans**

1. Purpose of the project

The project has been guided by the following research questions:

- Does the growing permeation of social life by new media (digital media based on the Internet and mobile technology platforms, including the latest generation of “social media”) contribute to the strengthening of civil society in the new democracies on the fringes of the European Union, namely those located in the Baltics and the Balkans?
- And, if so, in what concrete ways do new digital media help develop and consolidate civil society in countries of those regions?
- The project also sought to establish what the actors populating the civil society landscape did with them and how different kinds of media were integrated into the practices of activism and consequently, into collective actions undertaken by citizens and civic organizations. That led to the questions of who the people involved in activism — mediated or not— were (their socio-demographic characteristics, political attitudes and media and technological habits), how they compared to the rest of the population, and what kinds of meanings and actions digital media facilitated or prompted at their hands.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

- a. The project moved the inquiry past the criteria of “organizational density” and “economic relevance” of CSOs (see Meyer et al. 2017, 13) and the number of members registered in them that are used to assess the strength (or weakness) of civil society in a country. Our qualitative methodologies allowed us to examine the daily life of civil society in the two countries and to cast light on its cultural fabric. Accounting for concrete acts of civic engagement and the social imaginaries underlying them, we were able to identify and compare various patterns of civic culture within and between Estonia and Bulgaria thus overcoming the dichotomy between civic activist and passive population. Our approach enabled us to study how digital media impacted the dynamics of civic engagement not looking at them as technologically driven change agents, but as cultural tools enwrapped in individual and collective meaning-making processes and situated practices. While



previous research argues for the benefits of having access to digital and personal communication technologies for acting in civic space, our research concludes that access also needs to be related to the ways in which citizens perceive of the affordances of digital technology. Estonia is, for example, a country with well-developed internet infrastructure and easy access points in the whole country. Bulgaria finds itself at the other end of the access spectrum. Despite these material circumstances, Bulgarian media users perceive of themselves as much more connected than do Estonian media users: 63% of media users in Bulgaria agrees to the proposition that they have “Good Internet always and everywhere”, whereas only 53% of Estonian media users agree to the same statement. Yet, Estonian users score higher than Bulgarian on every parameter when it comes to access to smartphones, laptops, computers, etc.

- b. The project produced and analyzed a unique data set with nationally representative data on citizen agency as related to media use in Bulgaria and Estonia, as well as qualitative data on civil society organisations and their activities in Bulgaria and Estonia.
- c. The project has substantially advanced the knowledge about the spectrum of forms that civic agency takes. It refutes the idea that civil society in Eastern Europe is endemically weak and shows that civic action needs to be understood in its historical and cultural context. It highlights the diversity of organizational forms that civic activism manifests itself in – from informal small groups to professionalized and internationally connected and funded NGOs. Importantly, it reveals the dense network of interactions between these organizations and the useful mutual support and reinforcement of shared causes. The results of the analysis demonstrate that digital media are instrumental to the construction and maintenance of such an infrastructure of collaboration.

3. The project’s contribution to the international research frontline

The contribution to the international research frontline relates to the nuance that it brings to the spectrum of forms in which civic agency take.

The project traced the appropriation trajectories of digital media across civil society instead of their place in particular protest campaigns, which is the common approach in the international literature. This provided a more extensive view on the various trials, innovations and balancing acts that shaped the movement of these media through the complex channels of civic action —of making connections between citizens, keeping groups and organizations together, proselytizing civic causes and building public support. It highlights the numerous ways in which digital media add value to existing practices of civic participation and make new pursuits possible in the course of the daily work of activists. Moving attention beyond manifest activism revealed the broad spectrum of acts of citizenship spanning offline and online spaces that give civil society a vibrancy and flesh out democratic engagement.

The outcome of the inquiry is a multilayered picture of a series of civic cultures characterized by their specific imaginaries, practices, associational networks,



spaces and mediations. Purposefully throwing these cultures with their similarities, differences and interactions into high relief, adds depth to the understanding of civil society and offers a model for further research that can be applied with respect to other national contexts.

The project identified the following critical points in which digital media intertwine with the imaginaries and actions of citizens engaged with the ongoing affairs of their polis:

- Overcoming NGO-ization: constructing publics through digital advocacy
- Digital empowerment of the grassroots through the formation of self-organized citizen groups;
- An emerging “engagement rainbow” – allowing citizens to get engaged and participate in public deliberation and action in various degrees of intensity and commitment and through various means;
- The integration of different types of media forming a dynamic “media landscape” affording extended public reach and creative self-representation on the part of citizen organizations. Importantly, the research showed that mainstream media remain a critical site for advancing or crushing civic causes and the understanding of activism and its efficacy;
- The digitization of uncivil groups and their activities creating fractures and controversies in the civil society realm;

4. New research questions that the project has led to

How should existing notions and criteria of the weakness and strength of civil society be reformulated?

How can the full scope of performative citizenship with its tools and challenges be adequately conceptualized in diverse national contexts?

What are the macro-structural conditions such as economic and technological development and legal and regulative frameworks that foster or hinder the effective uptake of the affordances of digital media by civil society actors?

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

The project has contributed to research on the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe both empirically and theoretically.

Empirically, it has resulted in a new quantitative and qualitative dataset. The quantitative set was collected in the autumn of 2015 and concerns questions about media access and use, trust in individuals and institutions, attitudes, and forms of engagement in civil society, etc. The qualitative data set consists of interviews and field notes from selected



civil society organizations in Bulgaria and Estonia, as well as individual activists and supporters.

Theoretically, it has led to a re-evaluation of some definitions, models and theories of civil society, activism and civic engagement that have emerged from western European and Anglo-American historical and institutional contexts. The project has identified patterns of engagement and ways of organizing civic life that are characteristic of societies like Estonia and Bulgaria (and presumably also other post-communist East European countries) where democratic institutions and practices on the one hand and digitization of social life, on the other, are co-evolving.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Monographs

Bakardjieva, Maria, Stina Bengtsson, Göran Bolin & Kjell Engelbrekt (2021) *Digital Media and the Dynamics of Civil Society: Retooling Citizenship in New EU Democracies*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

OA: <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781786616401/Digital-Media-and-the-Dynamics-of-Civil-Society-Retooling-Citizenship-in-New-EU-Democracies>

Peer review articles

Bakardjieva, M. (2021) The other civil society: digital media and grassroots illiberalism in Bulgaria. *European Societies*, DOI: 10.1080/14616696.2021.1966072.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/doSearch?AllField=DOI%3A+10.1080%2F14616696.2021.1966072&SeriesKey=reus20>

Bakardjieva, M. and Konstantinova, N. (2021). Politics vs. antipolitics in the mediatised public sphere: traversing the contested boundary between the civic and the political in Bulgaria. *Javnost: The Public*, Vol. 28, No. 1
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2020.1839838>

Bakardjieva, M. (2019). A tale of three platforms: collaboration, contestation, and degrees of audibility in a Bulgarian e-municipality. *International Journal of Communication* 13: 5652–5670

OA: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/download/10809/2872>

Bakardjieva, M. (2015). Do Clouds Have Politics? Collective Actors in Social Media Land, *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 8, Special Issue: Social Media and Protest Identities, pp. 983-990, DOI:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1043320>

Book chapters

Bakardjieva, M. and Engelbrekt, K. (2020) Digital media and the thinning out of civic activism: empowerment/disempowerment of the savvy few. In Kostadinova, P. and K.



Engelbrekt (Eds.) *Bulgaria's Democratic Institutions at Thirty: A Balance Sheet*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, pp. 179-199.

Sõmersalu, Liisa (2018) *Retooling Citizenship in Estonia: Online Media Practices by Civil Society Actors in Everyday and Mobilization Contexts*. In Laura Peja, Nico Carpentier, Fausto Colombo, Maria Francesca Murru, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Leif Kramp, Risto Kunelius, Anthony McNicholas, Hannu Nieminen, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (eds) *Current Perspectives on Media and Communication Research*. Bremen: Edition Lumière.

OA: <http://www.researchingcommunication.eu/SuSobook2017.pdf>

Licentiate thesis

Sõmersalu, Liisa (2022) *Civic Cultures in Eastern Europe: Communication Spaces and Media Practices of Estonian Civil Society Organizations*. Södertörn University.

Most important conferences

Digital Media and Civil Society in Bulgaria Workshop. Workshop organized by the project together with the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Sofia University, 21 September 2017. Presentations by team members and Bulgarian activists and discussion (ca 20 participants).

Bakardjieva, Maria (2019). *Becoming an Activist: Finding the Role of Digital Media in Individuals' Civic Engagement*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, Madrid.

Bakardjieva Maria, Konstantinova, Nelly (2019). *Politics vs. "anti-politics" in digital communication: Traversing the contested boundary between the civic and the political in Bulgaria*. Paper presented at Social Movements and Parties in a Fractured Media Landscape conference. COSMOS, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, 1-2 July 2019

Bakardjieva, Maria. (2018) *Liberalism Lost: From Populist Media to 'Illiberal Democracies' in Central and Eastern Europe*. Panel organized at the annual conference of the International communication Association, Prague.

Bakardjieva, Maria (2018). *The Posts that Bond: Voice Rehearsal in Bulgarian Activist Communities*. Paper presented at the session Practicing Activists' Voice in Quiet Times (co-organized with Alice Mattoni) at the annual conference of the European Communication Research and Education Association, Lugano.

Bakardjieva, Maria & Engelbrekt, Kjell (2017) *The Savvy Few: Digital Media, Social Movement Politics, and the Thinning Out of Civic Activism in Central and Eastern Europe*. Paper presented at Activation – Self-Management – Overload: Political Participation beyond the Post-democratic Turn, International Research Workshop, 27th – 29th of September 2017, Institute for Social Change and Sustainability (IGN), Vienna University for Economics and Business.

Bakardjieva, Maria. *Post-communist and Pre-digital: Bulgarian Seniors at the Margins of Citizenship*. Senior Citizens Domesticating ICTs, Workshop at the Media and Communication Department, University of Lund, Sweden, Lund, Sweden, April 2017

Bakardjieva, Maria, Dumitrica, Delia (2016) *Activation Trajectories: Tracing the Role of Social Media in Civic Mobilizations in Bulgaria and Canada*. International Sociological Association, Vienna, Austria, July 11-15.

Bakardjieva, Maria, Dumitrica, Delia (2016) *The anatomy of a grassroots civic mobilization: connective logic or collective action*. Canadian Sociological Association, Calgary, 2016 June.



Bakardjieva, Maria, Stina Bengtsson & Göran Bolin (2016) "Media Sociology, Connectivity and the Variable Depths of Mediatization", Presented at the 6th ECREA conference, Berlin, 9-12 November 2016.

Bakardjieva, Maria (2015). Democracy Retweeted? Digital Media and Civic Engagement. Invited seminar given at the Institute for the Human Sciences, Vienna, Austria.