

WHAT DRIVES CIVIC PARTICIPATION  
OF YOUNG PEOPLE?  
A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE INTERNET  
IN BULGARIA

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## Abstract

Both civil society organizations and policy practitioners are currently attempting to enhance civic participation, and the Internet is seen as a valuable tool to do that. In the theoretical sphere, debates on the role of the Internet in regard to civic participation have not yielded definite conclusions. This research examines the relationship between NGOs and technology in terms of driving young people's participation. The communication strategies of four Bulgarian NGOs are analyzed with the focus on their websites, the usage of social media, and offline communication. The results show that the Internet has a very important place in facilitating NGOs to communicate with young people and encourage offline engagement, but is not utilized by NGOs to facilitate online participation. Offline communication is still relevant, and NGOs show preferences to combining it with online communication. Furthermore, there is a variety of spaces and modes of participation that NGOs encourage through different ways, and all these are not mutually exclusive but reinforce each other.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

Civil society is often considered an attribute of a functioning democracy, the underlying assumption being that civil society is crucial for good governance. For example, the European Commission has called for involving more people and organizations in the policy-making process and stronger interaction between regional and local governments and civil society (2001, 3), and the World Bank emphasizes the relationship between strong civil society and development.

There is an ongoing debate nowadays on the state of civil society. The importance of a dynamic functioning civil society is confronted with claims about a decline in civic participation (Putnam 2000a). Given that voluntary associations can contribute to the performance of political institutions (Putnam 2000b) and the economy (Fukuyama 1995), it is important to consider the negative effects that persistent disengagement could have over the state and the market. This is particularly true in regard to young people as the future generation.

Young people - persons between 15 and 24 years old according to the UN definition - are typically seen as a specific societal group that is not easy to involve in policy and community matters. Moreover, some authors claim young people are significantly less engaged in civic life than their predecessors used to be (for example Galston 2004, Delli Carpini 2000), whereas others regard them as indicative for phenomena that the whole society is going through, such as decline of civic engagement and social capital (for example Putnam 2000a, Fieldhouse et. al. 2007). Such inferences depend, however, on how young people's participation is conceptualized, and there are authors, such as Bachen et. al. (2008), who suggest that young people are engaged but not necessarily in political matters.

With the spread of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) that attract young people, and also enable content generation by the users themselves, the hope has risen that young people can be reconnected again (Katz and Rice 2002, Loader 2007). However, as some authors would argue (e.g. Quan-Haase and Wellman 2002; CivicWeb 2009), empirical data show that this does not necessarily hold true, and the Internet is a useful tool for those already engaged. On the other hand, the Internet has been blamed for decreasing social contacts and trust, thus for the decline of social capital (Putnam 2000a). Since the Internet is a constantly changing space, conclusions about its role in society seem to be unclear for the moment.

The current paper links two broad fields of social sciences: civil society and civic participation, on the one hand, and young people and the internet, on the other hand, and examines their interrelation in the particular post-communist environment of Bulgaria. Bulgaria is not an exception of the observed “weakness” of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe (Howard 2002, Sotiropoulos 2005), but rather an indicative case. Examining civil society in this country will help provide better understanding of the Eastern European social environment. Furthermore, the literature on both civil society and young people in Bulgaria is not very well developed, and nor is the research on young people’s civic engagement.

Therefore, this thesis will contribute to academic research on young people’s participation in Bulgaria by examining the relationship between civil society and technology in terms of driving young people’s participation. The underlying question is how civil society organizations take advantage of modern information and communication technologies, in particular the World Wide Web, to engage young people in community and policy matters in Bulgaria. To explore the research question, four non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on and run by young people were qualitatively analyzed. These are “Zelenite”, Start UP, CVS-Bulgaria, RYC “Initiative”. Testing the power of ICTs to engage young people was beyond the scope of the

research, rather I analyzed the potential to do so. A qualitative in-depth study is applied to their communication strategies, analyzing their websites, the usage of social media, and offline communication. It will be shown that the Internet plays a very important role in terms encouraging and empowering participation, but has also serious limitations. Its usage is not utilized by the examined NGOs.

The first chapter lays down the theoretical foundations, drawing on the three bodies of literature: civil society, participation, and young people and the Internet. In the second chapter, the methodology of the research is presented. The third chapter analyses the findings from the empirical research, and the last chapter provides implications and recommendations for NGOs and policy makers, and suggests areas for further research.

## Chapter 2. Theoretical background

The concept of civil society has been part of the social sciences tradition, yet being an elusive concept, it is loaded with many different definitions and connotations. Although clearly defining civil society will be of great use, the present research will not do so. Rather, it sets up the frame for analysis on the basis of three bodies of literature- civil society, participation, and active citizenship.

### 2.1. How to understand civil society?

The Centre for Civil Society (CCS) at the LSE offers the following definition:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations. (CCS, 2009).

Even if not exhaustive, this definition captures the diversity and the voluntary character of practices and institutions put under the label of civil society. It will, therefore, serve as a working definition for this study. The paper uses nonprofit non-governmental organizations as a proxy for understanding the “infrastructure” of civil society (Eisele 2005, 3), even though social movements, virtual communities, or dot-com-causes can be arguably part of civil society composition, as well.

In a nutshell, civil society organizations perform diverse core tasks to serve the interests of their members, but additionally to that, Eberly (2000) outlines three important functions of

civil society as a whole. These are: mediation between the individual on the one hand, and the state or the market on the other hand; the creation of social capital; and the formation of “democratic values and habits” (2000, 7). All these will be examined in the present thesis from different theoretical perspectives.

Civil society serves the role of balancing power relationships (Walzer 1991). Walzer points out that civil society can serve to counterbalance the state power through enhancing participation, to mitigate the economic inequalities, as well as to pluralize the society, fostering tolerance (1991, 302).

That civil society has been defined traditionally in a dichotomous way is not new. The problem is that such an approach may yield completely different understandings of what constitutes civil society in different cases. Kaviraj and Khilmani (2001) trace the development of the concept understood as an opposition to the “natural society”, the state, or “communitarian forms of belonging” (2001, 303). First, in lines with Hobbes, civil society was to support the state regarded as a rational “civic achievement” that is “the most essential and inclusive product of the associational capacity of human beings”, while later civil society represented by associations was to deter the state from exceeding its powers (2001, 290- 293). Similarly, Eisele asserts that during a transition period from an autocratic regime to a consolidated democracy, civil society may have varying functions, structure and ideology on each of the stages (2005, 5).

Edwards (2005) summarizes the three lines of thought currently prevailing in regard to civil society. The first one considers civil society as a part of the society (Edwards 2005). In Kocka’s words, there is a “societal sphere between state, economy and private life populated by voluntary associations, networks and non-governmental organizations” (Kocka 2002, cited in Zimmer and Freise 2006, 4). According to the second one, civil society translates into the “public sphere” or the “arena for societal deliberation” where different opinions are presented and a



common solution is sought (Edward 2005). Taylor also points out that civil society, even if opposed to the state, is still part of the public sphere, “a pattern of public social life, and not just a congeries of private interests” (Taylor 1990, cited in Kaviraj and Khilmani 2001, 298). In order for the civil society to work, it must be then more integrative than exclusive, more public than private. This corresponds to the different types of social capital, discussed later in the paper.

In the third perspective, civil society bears a normative sense, understood as a particular kind of society (Edwards 2005) that is intertwined with civiness (Zimmer and Freise 2006, 4). On a global scale, it can be an alternative to war (Kaldor 2003) and can democratize the new global relations (Keane 2003). As outlined by Edwards (2005), different approaches complement each other, since the good society can be realized through associational life but needs deliberation in the public sphere, whereas the achievements of a good society are a precondition for the existence of a democratic associational life (2005).

An understanding is necessary, however, that civil society need not be always virtuous. On theoretical level, following a Gramscian perception of civil society as a contested space, this may imply “incivilities”, as well (Mercer 2002, 11). Furthermore, it is not always the case in practice that civil society gives voice to the poor and underprivileged (Eisele 2005, 4). Such considerations need to be acknowledged, yet they do not undermine the value of civil society as a whole. The quality of civil society, understood as the “capacity of a society to criticize and to be able to confront its elites in the context of economic, political and societal development” (Sachße 2002, cited in Zimmer and Freise 2006, 4) is what matters more.

## 2.2. Civic participation

In order to link civil society to the political sphere, we need to consider the idea of citizenship intertwined with the modern state (Eberly 2000, 9). As identified by Dahlgren (2008), the difference between a received and an achieved citizenship comprises in the degree of political agency. Active citizenship, social belonging and participation are interrelated concepts (Eberly 2000, Dahlgren 2008). Only through participation can a sense of identity be fostered, whereby, as Eberly comments, participation implies being an active member of a civic community through a range of activities that are not necessarily political (2000, 9). A civic community built on civic engagement, political equality, solidarity, and tolerance, as well as voluntary associations, is what can make “democracy work”, as defended by Putnam (1993, quoted in Smith 2001).

Civic engagement may take many different forms. According to a taxonomy, developed by Keeter et al. and cited in Lopez et al., three main categories of activities: civic activities, electoral activities, and political voice activities, constitute civic engagement (Lopez et al, 2006, 7). The way in which civic engagement is conceptualized has strong implications on theorizing and drawing conclusions on young people’s participation, as discussed further in this paper.

The importance of civic engagement stems from the fact that it helps overcome the dilemmas of collective action through fostering reciprocity and trust (Putnam 2000b, 67), and leads to better governance (Putnam 2000a). Trust is conducive to democratic (Putnam 2000a) and economic (Fukuyama 1995) development, making civic or commercial human transactions smoother (Eberly 2000, 18). Participation may be an individual act, but has a “collective dimension” as well (Dahlgren 2008, 1).

The value of associational life is explored extensively by the social capital school. Social capital builds on positive externalities of social organizations, such as “networks, norms and

social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 2000b, 67).

Smith (2001) quotes Putnam (1993) that:

Voluntary cooperation is easier in a community that has inherited a substantial stock of social capital, in the form of norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement.

Moreover, whereas social capital was primarily linked to the individual, Putnam emphasizes that networks of interaction “enhancing the participants’ ‘taste’ for collective benefits” (Putnam 2000b, 67), have broader implications on community level.

Like other forms of capital, such as economic, human, cultural or physical, however, social capital may take many different forms, and can serve various purposes (Putnam 2001). Putnam (2000a) acknowledges himself that the concept should not be taken too optimistically and elaborates the difference between bonding and bridging social capital. Whereas the former is indeed promoting “in-group loyalty”, it is also characterized by “out-group antagonism” (2000a, 25). On the other hand, the latter is crucial for the development of civic community in which high levels of both social capital and tolerance coexist (2000a, 355). The distinction is very useful for understanding particular contexts of social- capital- rich societies that rank low, as far as organizational membership and trust are concerned.

### **2.3. Regional context: Civil society in Central and Eastern Europe**

Civil society in Central and Eastern European countries can be understood much better if examined in the light of the mentioned potential effects of the structure of social capital,. Not only does post-communist civil society remain weak, as argued by Howard (2002), but it is also

connected with negative social capital, as suggested by Sotiropoulos (2005, 245). Both of the features are rooted in communist legacy. Comparing organizational membership between 31 countries, Howard found a considerable lower mean (0.9 per person) for post-communist countries than in authoritarian countries or older-democracies (2002, 160). The fact that membership in state-run organizations was compulsory during communist time explains the distrust towards group activities (Howard 2002). Howard maintains that another factor- “the persistence of friendship networks”- contributes to the specific situation where trust is high among kin and friendship relations, but low towards people outside these networks (2002, 161). Even though bonding and bridging social capital can coexist (Putnam 2000a), prevailing negative social capital (in the form of bonding capital) does not bring “benefits for the wider society” (Sotiropoulos 2005, 246). More importantly, a comparative survey revealed low level of confidence in public institutions and the other forms of collective organizations, while trust was cultivated in the kin or smaller communities (Sotiropoulos 2005). Disappointment from the transition period is outlined by Howard (2002) as a third reason for low level of trust and social capital.

Bulgaria seems to be a case where these tendencies are particularly manifested, as it is noted in the studies of Howard (2002) and Sotiropoulos (2005). Given the fact that trust, civility, social authority, and democratic skills and habits are, as Eberly calls them, “by-products of civil society” (2000, 5), strengthening civil society would logically improve the functioning of democracy and relations in society. A similar standpoint is taken by a number of international organizations and authorities, for example the European Commission, the World Bank, Council of Europe. There has been “a shift from output to input legitimacy of democratic systems” (Zimmer and Freise 2006, 3). Acknowledging that automatically linking civil society and participation with good governance might be problematic, this paper assumes that empowerment

of citizens is indeed necessary for the enhancement of democratic quality, therefore, it explores the mechanisms through which more engagement is facilitated.

## **2.4. Communication technologies and the decline of social capital**

The role of information and ICTs in relation to civic engagement is twofold. First, “civic engagement is enabled by communication” (Swanson 2000, 409). As outlined by Putnam, communication is “a fundamental prerequisite for social and emotional connections” (2000a, 171). It is then to expect that the development of telecommunications would have enhanced those connections, and thus have proven conducive to social capital and more informed citizenry.

On the other hand, Putnam (2000a) points to the decline of social capital in practice and pays specific attention to the role of the technology and the mass media in this. While creating a personalized entertaining experience, TV for example leads to greater civic disengagement simply because it “privatizes” the leisure time, as well as the civic activity (2000a, 229). The result is not only a constant decline in voter turnout marked in a number of countries, but also rising reluctance for membership in voluntary associations, a social phenomenon become known as “bowling alone” (Putnam 2000a).

Similar considerations are raised in regard to the Internet. Katz and Rice (2002) summarize the utopian and dystopian views on how the Internet impacts civic involvement. While providing for easier and faster interactions between people across borders, as well as an opportunity for self-expression and better mobilization of groups, the Internet is alleged to exacerbate inequalities and cleavages among societies, to establish only weak ties that cannot qualitatively substitute face-to-face interactions, but tend to oust them, and to fragment

information, thus contributing to further disengagement and decline of social capital (Katz and Rice 2002). Providing all kinds of information, the Internet also poses the question about potential disinformation which impacts civic engagement, as well (Bimber 2000, Swanson 2000).

That is why Katz and Rice (2002) propose a “syntopian” approach, and Quan-Haase et. al. call for recognizing that the “Internet use is not a uniform activity“ (2002, 315). Similarly, Bakardjieva distinguishes between “isolated consumption of goods and services” and “virtual togetherness (or community)” where people interact with each other and contribute to “content, space, relationship, and/ or culture” (2003, 294). In any case, the Internet is still not explored enough to draw definite conclusions, so tracing its impacts on civic engagement necessitates further research.

## **2.5. Young people, civic engagement, and the Internet**

It is widely believed that processes and tendencies of civic disengagement are typical of young people nowadays (Delli Carpini 2000, Galston 2004, Fieldhouse et. al. 2007, Zukin 2006). Galston argues that they feel more comfortable with individualized acts, rather than collective public actions, the consequences of which they do not really trust (2004, 263). This is what Loader calls “the *disaffected* citizen perspective”, which pays attention to formal institutions and procedures, and which characterizes young people as citizens who know only their rights, but not their obligations (2007, 1). According to a study by Lopez et. al., young people are more likely to volunteer (2004), but volunteering is perceived rather an “alternative to official politics” (Galston 2004, 263).

On the other hand, there are authors who suggest that it is not the young people who have distanced from the political, but politics have disengaged with young people (CivicWeb 2009, Coleman 2007). Loader offers the term “the *cultural displacement* perspective”, explaining that contemporary youth culture and traditional political activity do not necessarily match any longer (2007, 1- 2). From this perspective, it can be argued that young people are indeed engaged in activities that, however, are not typically regarded as civic or political engagement (Vromen 2003, UP2Youth 2009).

For a number of reasons, youth civic engagement needs rethinking (see for example Gerodimos and Ward 2007; Livingstone et. al. 2004), but both too narrow a definition of political participation and a too broad one covering virtually all activities should be avoided. Civic engagement may take many different forms. Montgomery et. al. suggest ten categories: volunteering; voting; global issues/ international understanding; online youth journalism/ media production; tolerance and diversity; positive youth development; media literacy; youth activism; youth philanthropy; workings of government (2004, 18-19), only three of which are directly connected to politics. That patterns of civic or political practice are changing, should be recognized. In this sense, young people may indeed turn out to be engaged in a variety of issues, but still feel “alienated by conventional forms of political discourse” (CivicWeb 2009, 8).

What is also specific about young people today is that they are witnessing a changing socio-economic, as well as media and technological environment. There is a widely spread hope that the Internet has the power to re-connect young people. With “one person in two” using the Internet daily in the EU-27, and three quarters of the young people doing so (Eurostat 2009, 1), it is reasonable to think that an outreach through the Internet could be highly effective. Notably, while Bulgaria is lagging behind with only 30% household internet access, 63% of the 16- to 24-

aged are using the Internet on a daily basis in comparison to EU-27 average of 73% (Eurostat 2009, 3).

The Internet might be very promising as a medium because it widely penetrates young people's lives and corresponds to a large extent to their values. It facilitates for example more horizontal, civic communication (Dahlgren 2004). Delli Carpini lists a number of reasons, such as increased speed and volume of transmitted information, as well as flexibility for accession time, greater interactivity, the integration of different types of media and blurring lines between consumers and producers of information (2000, 7-8). Bachen et. al. elaborate on his claim, saying that the Internet could "facilitate the *supply* of civic knowledge and skill-building and the *demand* for those by youth" (2008, 291). On the supply side, political elites, organized groups and civic media can take advantage of the low cost, the enhanced speed and scope, interactivity and range of possibilities to form interest-based communities. On the demand side, youth are already involved in internet usage that includes not only entertainment but also news and information (Bachen et. al. 2008, 292).

Because of the diverse options it offers, the Internet could be also very effective to reach not only engaged citizens, but also those who are "*interested but inactive*" (Delli Carpini 2001, 8). Bachen et al. (2008, 292- 293) refer to a research, carried out in the US, that shows that not only are Internet users among young people increasing, but also that there is a correlation between informational uses of the Internet and "positive civic attitudes and behavior among youth and young adults" (Bachen et al. 2008, 293). They argue that the Internet fosters interest, trust, participation in voluntary organizations, and community service (2008, 293). Delli Carpini suggests that "new forms of engagement" may emerge with the new technology (2000, 348).

Such an optimistic view on the role of the new technologies is far from problematic, however. First of all, the relationship between internet usage and civic participation is not direct.



From this perspective, the Internet has more limited power to reach those who “are *neither engaged nor clearly motivated*” (2001, 9). As reported in CIVCWEB project “the Internet can be a valuable tool for young people who are *already* engaged in civic and political activity”, whereas for young people who are disengaged/ excluded, “different means are required” (2009, 4).

Secondly, the possibility of cyber-balkanization is really high (Putnam 2000a, Katz and Rice 2002). Single-issue campaigns or groups are closer to a bonding kind of social capital, and therefore may lead to greater disintegration than integration in society. Delli Carpini draws the attention also to issues such as consumerism, manipulation, and information overload (2000, 348).

Last but not least, the Internet is taken up by young people in different ways. Livingstone et. al. distinguish between two types of participation: “interacting with websites” and “visiting websites”, in order to differentiate between general use of the Internet and particular visits of civic and political websites (2005, 13). They suggest that interaction on the internet is not to be confused with interest in civic and political matters, yet “a positive transfer of skills and interests across online activities” is possible (2005, 17). Furthermore, they establish three categories of young users, namely: interactive, civic-minded and disengaged, which can be assigned to users with particular demographic and economic characteristics. The Internet does not seem to offer a space equally shared by all young people, and “offline” demographic and socio- economic factors transfer also online, not only in terms of access, but also in terms of skills for and types of interaction (Livingstone et. al. 2005, Hargittai 2010).

The Internet may prove to be a tool to inform, or provoke interest. It is another question, however, whether and how the interest transforms into engagement and action. The question is not an easy one, and needs more empirical research. Still, there are opinions that political or civic groups do not entirely use the potential of the new technologies to promote participation

(Livingstone et. al. 2004, Bennett et. al. 2009). This is what the focus of the current paper is, using Bulgarian NGOs as case studies.

## Chapter 3. Methodology

Given that the aim is to examine the relationship between civil society and technology in terms of driving young people's participation, I used a combined methodology. Based on selected case studies of NGOs focused on young people, the communication strategies are scrutinized to verify the usage of relevant technologies.

In accordance with what Gerodimos and Ward (2007) recommend, case studies are the most suitable method to analyze a sphere as new and dynamic as youth civic culture online.

### Case selection

The case selection was based on "purposeful sampling" (Patton 1999, 169) according to several criteria. First, the examined organizations are non-profit NGOs focused on, and to a large extent run by, young people. Secondly, these are grass root organizations that are more mainstream than particular, and, thus, have the potential to be inclusive and create social capital. At the same time, upon choosing the cases, a widest possible sample of topics, target groups, activities, and level of representation was sought. In this regard, the examined NGOs constitute a sample that is exemplary of mainstream NGOs that engage with young people. Last but not least, all the organizations, having different missions and particular audiences, are expected to differ in their communication strategies.

The cases I chose are Regional Youth Council (RYC) "Initiative", "Zelenite" (The Bulgarian Greens), Start UP, and Cooperation for Voluntary Service- CVS Bulgaria. Their activities cover a wide range of topics, starting from capacity- building and fostering tolerance, to promoting entrepreneurship, to a green social movement and green politics, to voluntarism. What

is more, they can potentially provide opportunities for different types of civic engagement. Adopting a classification of civic engagement categories developed by Montgomery et. al. (2004), we can say that the examined NGOs cover 5 out of 10 possible types of participation: RYC “Initiative” is focused on tolerance and diversity, as well as engagement with the local community; Start UP aims at positive youth development; Zelenite combine voting and youth activism; CVS is about volunteering and community service. Furthermore, they are represented on regional and national levels.

### **Data Gathering**

The input of NGOs will be connected to communication strategies used to deal with potential and actual members, stakeholders, and the media. The usage of communication channels, media campaigns, social networks and face-to-face communication are examined. Because the feasibility of measuring the change in young people’s engagement is limited, a point for analysis will be the potential of those organizations to first reach, and secondly, mobilize young people. The ways in which young people are reacting upon the messages communicated by those organizations are beyond the scope of this paper, so information on those is only briefly mentioned.

Data gathering was based on triangulation, therefore, a qualitative analysis of web pages is complemented by data from in-depth interviews with NGO representatives. Thus, as recommended by Gerodimos and Ward (2007, 124), web content analysis is weighed against the “intended use and content”, revealed by the NGOs representatives. In all the cases but one, I interviewed the person responsible for communication, and in the case of Start UP, I interviewed the manager. Semi-structured interviews were preferred to closed questionnaires in order to provide respondents with more “time and space” (Jones 2004, 258) to frame the topic according

to their own understanding. The answers provided by the interviewees themselves are of great value for the qualitative examination of the research question.

## Chapter 4. Bulgarian NGOs, the Internet and young people's engagement

### 4.1. Research context

As discussed earlier, the context of Bulgarian civil society is specific in several aspects. There have been attempts from international and domestic actors to revitalize the sector by providing financial or technical support, but the voluntary sector remains underdeveloped (Bogdanova 2008) not only in comparison to its Western counterparts, but also compared to other post-communist countries (Howard 2002).

Another dimension that can be added to the underdevelopment of the third sector in Bulgaria relates to limited existing research on civil society, especially with focus on young people. The literature on young people is primarily focused on aspects, such as educational choices and the attractiveness of studying abroad (e.g. Chavdarova 2006), or transition to adulthood in relation to work and family-life (e. g. Kovatcheva 2008). Thus, it tends to neglect the linkage between young people as a group within the society and their empowerment for action and decisions beyond their personal lives. There are, of course, few exceptions, such as Kovatcheva's (2000) work "Keys on Youth Participation in Eastern Europe", but in general studies on young people are very limited. Moreover, the relationship between the young people and the Internet is not seen as empowering. Given the relative high penetration of Internet usage by young people in Bulgaria, this field needs more research on the ground.

This paper departs from the existing literature on civic participation, young people and the Internet that is prevailingly Western- dominated, to come to the particular context of four Bulgarian NGOs. Thus, it provides an empirical testing of ideas developed in the context of Western societies, and contributes to the understanding of Bulgarian developing civil society.

## 4.2. Introduction to cases

### Zelenite



Fig. 1. Zelenite's logo

Outlined in academic research is the rise of issue-driven campaigns, identity- or lifestyle politics on the cost of traditional class/ politics considerations (Bennett at. al. 2009, Bennett 2000). Therefore, the first organization to examine is “Zelenite” that combines activism on environment issues and politics. Zelenite means The Greens in Bulgarian. Grown grass-roots as a social movement against building-up in different protected zones, “Zelenite” transformed into a political party in 2008 and ran for the 2009 elections. They were close to the 1% threshold, but failed to reach it (Central Election Commission 2009). The mission of the organization is not limited to environment only, but is based on the four pillars of green politics: environment protection; sustainable development; democracy development and refinement; human rights and tolerance (Stoimenov 2010; Zelenite 2010). Both within the organization of the party, as well as within its supporters, young people constitute a significant part.

“Zelenite” keep organizing protests against resolutions and practices potentially harmful for the nature and people's health, at which young people are prevailing. Stoimenov admits that because of the diversity of people showing up, including the “young people with the colorful clothes” (meaning hippie-, or anarchist-like), the party is not perceived seriously enough in the society. He goes on to say it is important that everybody can join, even though he personally is in

favor of a more official appearance on the party. The party is funded by membership fees, and donations, for which ceilings are established in order to guarantee financial independence (Stoimenov 2010). The environmental thematic is reflected in the logo which is green, with the name written in Bulgarian and a letter resembling a leaf.

### **Start UP**



Fig. 2. Start UP's logo

Founded in 2007 by several students, Start UP is a nonprofit NGO with the mission to promote the enterprising spirit among young people in Bulgaria. The main goal is creating an ecosystem for starting up business in Bulgaria (Start UP). Up until now, Start UP has been organizing events in Sofia, among which the three biggest conferences on entrepreneurship in Bulgaria. The aim is to provide young people with the opportunity to meet entrepreneurs and learn from their experience, and to start networks with similar-minded people.

Independent youth organizations, prevailingly students organizations, that share the ideology of Start UP can launch different Labs or to organize conferences in other cities of the country on the basis of cooperation. Labs are technological and scientific laboratories where young people can work and turn their “crazy” ideas into startups (Start UP 2010). Currently, there is the InitLab (for software and web applications development), Marketing Lab and Bio Vision.

Start UP and its events happen offline, however, the team is working primarily online, since “at the moment, there are no physical members in Start UP” (Aleksiev 2010). This suggests



that the Internet plays a crucial role both in internal and external communication, as confirmed later.

## CVS



Figure 3. CVS logo

The logo of CVS symbolizes giving a hand, and that is what the organization is about. CVS is an independent branch of an international voluntary service and peace organization – SCI, based in Sofia. It was launched in 1998 by Bulgarian volunteers who participated in short term voluntary projects abroad (CVS 2010). It aims at promoting and facilitating voluntary service in different areas - culture, ecology, art, work with children and disadvantaged people - contributing to international peace and social justice. Young people can participate in international voluntary exchanges, domestic volunteering, training courses, seminars, study visits, workshops and discussions (CVS 2010).

## RYC “Initiative”



Figure 4. The RYC “Initiative” logo

The RYC “Initiative” is a local, grass- root organization founded 5 years ago by Rossen Dimitrov, who was then 17 years old. He was member of the official delegation of Bulgaria to the

UN last year and also member of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers with the President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso (Paterkova 2010). The organization is based in Stara Zagora (a city in Southeastern Bulgaria with slightly more than 150 000 citizens). It works toward multiethnic partnership, and awareness-raising in regard to people from different ethnicity or disabilities. It organizes local initiatives aimed at enhancing the participation of young people, particularly those who will soon be eligible to vote, in the community life, including through proposing policy and legislative changes. (Paterkova 2010). It does not have a functioning site at the moment.

### **4.3. Analysis**

Having outlined the four case studies, it is visible that they cover different aspect of civic participation, different topics, as well as geographic regions. As it would be logically to expect, they employ different strategies to engage young people civically and politically. The analysis of their communication strategies will go through their own website, to the usage of other online tools, such as social media, to the existing “offline” promotion.

This chapter will examine the findings from the research according to the outlined framework for the analysis.

#### **4.3.1. What is youth?**

Interviews with NGO leaders reveal that they have varying perceptions of young people. Start UP and Zelenite make an explicit connection between young people’s values and their age (Alexiev 2010, Stoimenov 2010). In the words of Alexiev: “Young people are up to 25. They

think out-of-the box, have new ideas. If they decide to do something, they can do it much more easily” (Alexiev 2010). CVS and the RYC “Initiative” do not emphasize age, but more the young spirit understood as being open, curious to find new things, enthusiastic (Kozareva 2010, Paterkova 2010).

The general assumptions about young people are that some might be some lacking in interest and engagement, but there are also others who are indeed concerned with the surrounding environment. Stoimenov defines the target of the Zelenite as: “the young urban human, who thinks and is not satisfied with easy solutions, who holds their life in their hands, who has proven his/herself” (Stoimenov 2010). Start UP’s Alexiev explains the relationship between the young people and the organization: “They want to progress, they are open, and we are giving them one possible way for development” (2010). According to Paterkova from the RYC “Initiative”, young people have opinion but are afraid to express it. They need to feel significant and esteemed, to know that things depend on them, in order to get motivated to participate (Paterkova, 2010). Such statements confirm some of the main concerns regarding young people’s engagement outlined in literature.

#### **4.3.2. Framework for analysis**

This research puts the relevant communication strategies in comparative perspective asking three questions:

1. How do NGOs use the Internet to encourage young people? What are the *means*?
2. What do NGOs encourage young people to do? What are the *goals* of the communication?
3. Where does participation take place? What *spaces* of participation are there?

## MEANS

The present thesis builds upon the assertion of Delli Carpini that civic engagement requires motivation, opportunity and ability (2000, 343). Motivation refers not only to interest, but a belief that involvement can contribute to problem-solving (2000, 343- 344). In this respect, his position is that labeling young people as demotivated needs to be reconsidered in the light of not only their wish to engage, but their perceptions whether their engagement would make a difference. Secondly, the opportunity stems from “civic infrastructure: from the structure and processes of elections to the number and type of civic and political associations” (2000, 343). Finally, ability concerns factors, such as time, money, information or particular skills (2000, 343). It seems that NGOs step in to facilitate young people’s participation in all the three aspects, but particularly in providing the opportunity to do so.

This is a general framework that Delli Carpini did not apply to a particular case, such as an NGO, or an online campaign. Therefore, this framework will be adapted here elaborating on what these three factors mean when applied to concrete cases of NGOs using the Internet to foster participation.

### **NGOs uses of the Internet to encourage participation:**

- Ability – information, toolkits, tutorials
- Opportunity - interactive features on the site or social media
- Motivation – visuals, success stories, inspiring quotes

#### Box 1. MEANS

It is assumed that if the examined NGOs are to foster participation, they should enhance these three factors (Box 1). The ways they do it, if at all, are scrutinized in the respective communication strategies.

First, fostering the *ability* to engage would certainly involve providing relevant information, but more importantly, teaching skills on how to deal with that information and the surrounding environment. In this respect, NGOs are likely to inform young people, but may differ in the extent to which they contribute to young people's abilities in terms of skills-building. Secondly, the Internet and the new technologies offer opportunities to *motivate* young people through visuals, videos inspiring quotes, success stories, but NGOs may differ in the extent to which they use these.

Thirdly, the Internet has the potential to improve the *opportunities* for engagement facilitating online participation through interactive features and social media. In order to analyze how important online participation by young people is perceived by the organizations, and how easy it is meant to be, a distinction is made between interactive features that are embedded on the website itself, and the availability and visibility of links to interactive web platforms other than the site. Participation possibilities enabled on the site itself can be ranked as more engaging than transferring to other web platforms. Contributions in the form of user-generated content reflect the extent to which young people are taking advantage of the interactivity opportunities.

## GOALS

NGOs may encourage engagement that goes beyond the core activities of the organization. Analyzing the modes by which NGOs engage young people necessitates also putting them into a systematic framework for comparison. For this purpose, the following modes are suggested (Box 2).

**Modes by which NGOs encourage participation:**

1. Fostering relationship between the individual and the NGO
  - Proactive
  - Reactive
2. Fostering connections between individuals
  - Network communication
  - Individual action

**Box 2. GOALS**

The proposed modes of participation are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing if combined. With this, the research demarcates from a polarized understanding of participation in favor of supporting the variety of modes and spaces of engagement.

NGOs may involve young people by fostering relationships between the individuals and the NGOs, and also between the individuals. As far as the relationships between individuals and NGOs are concerned, young people may be encouraged to react to calls or messages by the organization, or also to have a voice and proactively shape the agenda of the NGOs, or even make their own project. Furthermore, the NGOs can facilitate connections between individuals, if they encourage networking besides from individual actions. The rationale is that a one-way single act of participation, such as donating or clicking the “Like” button, does show involvement, but there is no consent in theoretical debates whether such an activity contributes to the enhancement of civic culture and fosters social capital. On the other hand, it is the interactions and the connections between individuals that create social capital (Putnam 2000a), as discussed in Chapter 1.

## SPACES

Spaces:

- Online
- offline

Box 3. Spaces for participation

Young people may be encouraged to participate online, offline or both. Again, the differentiation is needed not because both are not possible at the same time, but because it outlines whether certain NGOs prefer concrete spaces. Online young people may participate through as user-generated content, talk-back options, online surveys, whereas offline refers to events, protests, meetings.

### 4.3.3. Communication Strategies

The analysis of the communication strategies is structured in three sections. First, the content and formal features of the individual NGOs sites are scrutinized in order to verify whether and how they motivate young people to get involved and provide them with opportunities to do so. The second part focuses on the usage of social media channels in terms of enabling young people to participate. The third part explores offline strategies that complement the strategies to reach young people.

## A. Individual NGO sites

### Zelenite

Zelenite's site is content-rich and interactive. Online participation is encouraged through a donation section, talk-back options, an online survey, a blog, and a forum. There is also a form to submit in case of complaints or requests for rule interpretation. Offline participation refers to membership in the party, as well as volunteering, campaigning, participation in the promotion by printing flyers, or buying T-shirts, pencils, etc. The notice board situated on the left hand side, as well as the calendar under the news section, point that the information on the site is being regularly updated, and that offline participation in conferences, protests, or meetings is considered very important by the organization. There are many links to partner organizations and their blogs are available, because Zelenite are supported by many other NGOs, causes and people.

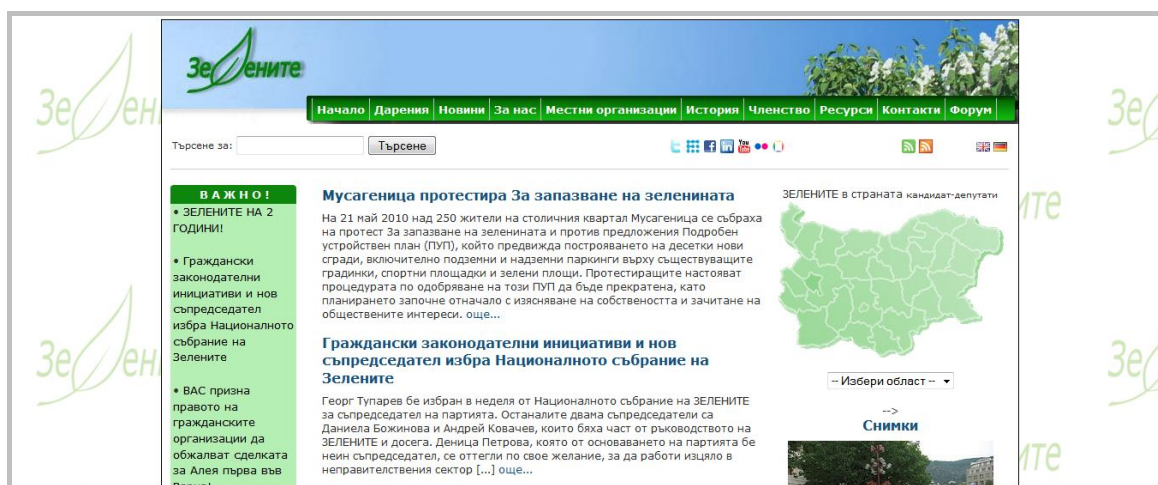


Fig. 5. Zelenite, home page

Via their website, “Zelenite” try to engage young people through providing extensive information about the organization, environmental issues, voting procedures; providing opportunity for online participation and comments, as well as offline support; applying social media channels that are easy to access. Users can follow the organization on twitter, Favit, or



LinkedIn, RSS feed, join the group on Facebook, watch pictures on Flickr or videos on Bulgarian Green's Youtube or vbox channels, read, comment or share documents Scribd. The site facilitates a proactive involvement as young people have the opportunity to engage with process of content- and strategy-generation, and networking. In this respect, the site resembles more an activist site providing options for online participation. However, it seems that interactivity was high during elections time, whereas currently there is prevailingly a one-way communication.

## Start UP

As an organization aimed at promotion of the enterprising spirit, Start UP is supported by internet-savvy business-oriented people. This is visible from the site that has a simple, not-flamboyant design and is carefully branded with the logo of Start UP. The simple interface does not reveal the hierarchical structure of the site. It incorporates the sites of all the labs and the events that are sometimes very different from the main site in terms of design, and applications.

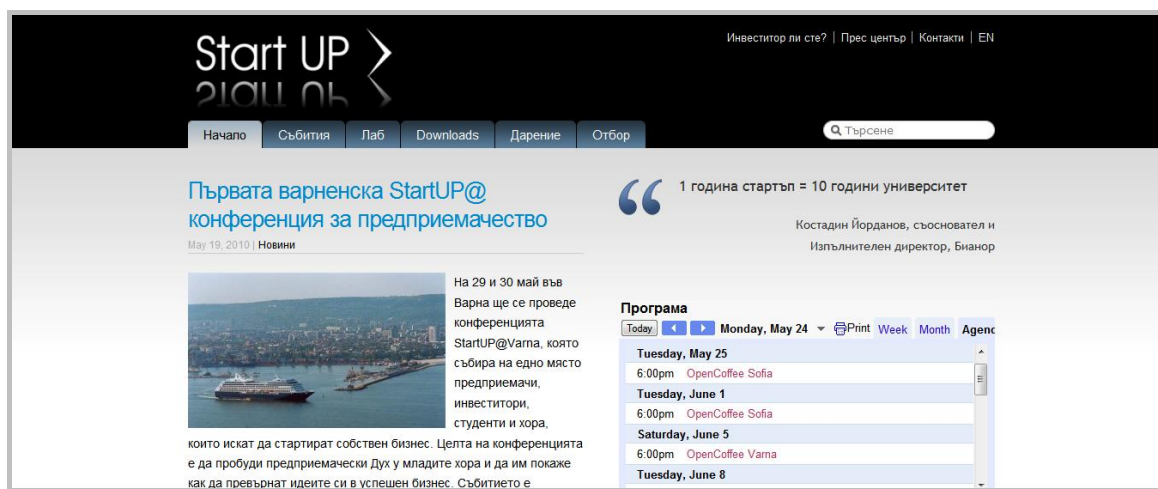


Fig. 6. Start UP home page

All resources from the conferences in the form of videos or presentations are available for downloading. Their goal is to provide knowledge and skills needed to run a business, and also to

motivate through the personal success stories of Bulgarian entrepreneurs. Young people are also invited not only to attend, but also to organize and shape their own Labs or events in lines with the spirit of Start UP, as the site shows. At the right corner, there is a space for inspiring quotations, such as “I want to put a ding in the universe.” (Steve Jobs, co-founder and CEO, Apple). As the manager of the organization revealed, the aim is to “make people enthusiastic about entrepreneurship” (Aleksiev 2010). Online contributions are vaguely encouraged through a contact form, a subscription for a mailing list, and a donation section. Links to Facebook, Twitter, RSS feeds, are mebedded on the site.

Start UP promotes much of a networked communication. The words of the manager capture precisely the crucial point that personal civic engagement and personal gains in civil society are mutually reinforcing: “If it is only me having access (to knowledge, ideas, and people), it won’t be possible for me alone in the morass to do good business, it is necessary that people around me have access and do good business, as well” (Interview Alexiev, May 3, 2010). Not only is the organization trying to enhance civic engagement, but it also aims at creating bridging social capital, as shared by Alexiev (2010): “For example, the environmentalists do not imagine that making ecobusiness is possible. That is what Start UP Bio also was about- so that people start to accept entrepreneurship, to understand it is something that helps the country, creates working places, and so on”.

Furthermore, Alexiev maps out a problem relevant to managing the quality and quantity of online content, explaining that a forum would need administration to keep information in a form that is usable and helpful for participants, but people need freedom to express themselves. He asserts that they are working on a better platform, a business network facilitate better communication possibilities (Aleksiev 2010).

## CVS

The home page of the CVS site is text-dominated, offering information about the organization's mission and history. Current and past activities are announced in the news section. The logo is at the header together with pictures connected with some of the activities the participants may enjoy upon joining the organization. Contacting the organization via post, mail or telephone, or personal visit, and becoming a member are encouraged. The list of vacancies for volunteering abroad provides descriptions of forthcoming projects that volunteers may want to participate in.

It is obviously a site trying to inform, not to interact, on which motivation to engage is promoted only through the power of language and pictures. There is no user-generated content on the site, and online participation is limited to acquiring information through uploaded materials or links to other sites. The links to Facebook and Twitter are not visible at first glance, since they are under the Contact section, and nor is the search engine for projects. Information that CVS offers technical support to those who want to organize "a project in public benefit" or an international voluntary workcamp, is provided, however, further encouragement and skills development through toolkits, or tips, are missing on the site. Interestingly enough, virtual volunteering is not mentioned on the site at all. As a whole, promoted is reactive relationship with the organization, networking and community-building taking place offline.



Fig. 7. CVS

The last organization- RYC “Initiative”- does not have a functioning site at the moment. Google search locates the organization in the web space on the blog of “Edna Evropa”/

One Europe campaign (Figure 6)



Fig. 8. RYC “Initiative” in the One Europe blog

### **Summary:**

All three websites enhance the knowledge, and Start UP and Zelenite teach also skills. Information on the sites is regularly updated which shows that the NGOs have a stable presence in civic life. The NGOs try to positively affect motivation through visuals, success stories, examples, quotes. In regard to providing the possibilities to participate, still more can be done. Clearly, offline activities are much more encouraged than participation online. In this regard, the site of the Zelenite is the most engaging, calling for both online and offline participation. All the three sites are interactive in one way or the other. In lines with the specifics of the organization, Start UP has a numerous downloadable materials from previous conferences, and Zelenite have political documents and positions to download from their site. Proactive relationships are encouraged to a different extent, but even CVS invites for starting up a project and getting in contact with the organization. All the NGOs foster network-building, with Start UP having it as a one of its goals.

If communication strategies were to be evaluated solely on the basis of their sites, RYC “Initiative” would be entirely unsuccessful, whereas only the Zelenite could claim success. The site of the particular organization cannot provide all the tools for connecting with young people. Therefore, the analysis will move towards the ways social media usage is utilized by these organizations.

### *B. Social media usage*

Internet use is optimized by providing different other options, prevailingly social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, links to other organizations, or to related topics. Basically, the attractiveness of social media lies within the opportunity for user-generated content

that can take many forms, from text, to pictures, to videos. This interactivity correlates to a pull-media type what Scammel (2001) calls “citizen-consumer”. In contrast, mailing lists tend to “push” information to the users. They seem to be a preferred option for communication with the target audience for CVS and RYC “Initiative” (Kozareva 2010; Paterkova 2010) which points that they favor reactivity in the relationships between young people and the NGOs.

A qualitative analysis shows, however, that social media are only tools that facilitate, yet do not necessarily guarantee, participation on behalf of the audience. Zelenite, for example, have their own channel on Youtube, where the uploaded videos show parts of the campaign held in different cities of the country. Remarkably, there is a video done by supporters called “The Green Power”. It humorously plays with Star Wars motifs and represents how supporters perceive the protection of nature in the country as a battle. The twitter is updated daily, but the blog is dominated by spam. On Facebook, Zelenite have nearly 6 000 subscribers, which is only around 25% of the votes they received in 2009 (around 22 000 according Central Election Commission 2009). Entries providing information about coming events, legislative changes, life-style politics and environmental issues are regular, and posted by the organization and by supporters. The discussions, however, are not very lively, with few people commenting on posts. Zelenite are also using a mailing list to disseminate information on recent issues and call on people to take action, to announce meetings of the local sections and invite subscribers to participate. This may prove to be a good tactic, since the last petition was signed by 43 594 people (Zelenite 2010), a significantly higher number than the supporters visible in social networks.

In comparison, Start UP has around 1500 members in Facebook, with most of them actively posting on its wall. That means the half of the people attended Start UP conferences (around 3000) are connected via social networks. Posts aim to promote the development of entrepreneurial culture through information, inspiring videos about masterpieces in sports, music,

business, or even philosophical thoughts. Start UP also uses a mailing list. According to Alexiev, social media played a crucial role in making the last event successful (2010). An invite-a-friend tactic guaranteeing reduction of participation fee also proved very efficient, he says. Start UP is cautious about putting the links of other organizations on the site, unless “something is really done together” (Alexiev 2010).

Unlike on its site, CVS is allowing for much more interactivity on Facebook. Users upload pictures and share information. The number of 600 friends and fans corresponds to the number of subscribers of the mailing group, according to Kozareva (2010). It is through this mailing list that information is circulated. To draw young people’s attention, the team sends around each week an “offer of the week”, that is a particular exchange, or a volunteer camp, and “many people react to it” (Kozareva, 2010).

The new blog is better than the site in terms of styling, and structure. The colors are mild, and it allows for online participation through commenting on posts, subscribing to RSS, and contacting the organization. Stories of volunteers and participants in camps, backed up with pictures, are posted by the admin, but there are still no comments to them.



Fig. 9 CVS blog

As for the RYC “Initiative”, social media, particularly Facebook, is of great importance. It is there where information is shared, mainly by the administrator to the others. Paterkova (2010) says that the mailing list is also very useful. The communication style is extremely friendly, sometimes addressing young people by using chat language and symbols. Even though the organization has only 100 participants on Facebook, that does not mean it is not active. Information concerning events organized by RYC “Initiative” or in which members can participate, is updated almost on daily basis on the wall or through sent messages.

An idea about the scale of the activities is the participation in a video conference on May 26, 2010 organized by the World Bank. The topic is “Applying different (inter)cultural approaches for realization of the UN Millennium Goals”. Young participants from the region of Stara Zagora, including students, pupils, and young people from ethnic minorities, together with 5 other countries in the world, are invited to share experience, discuss problems, and give ideas about solutions and projects to develop in a network. The information about the event is disseminated by Facebook. Furthermore, online platforms such as Facebook and blogs have, according to Paterkova (2010), such a considerable outreach that also the deputy- major, the Ombudsman, and members of the Regional Education Inspectorate use them as a space for online meetings.



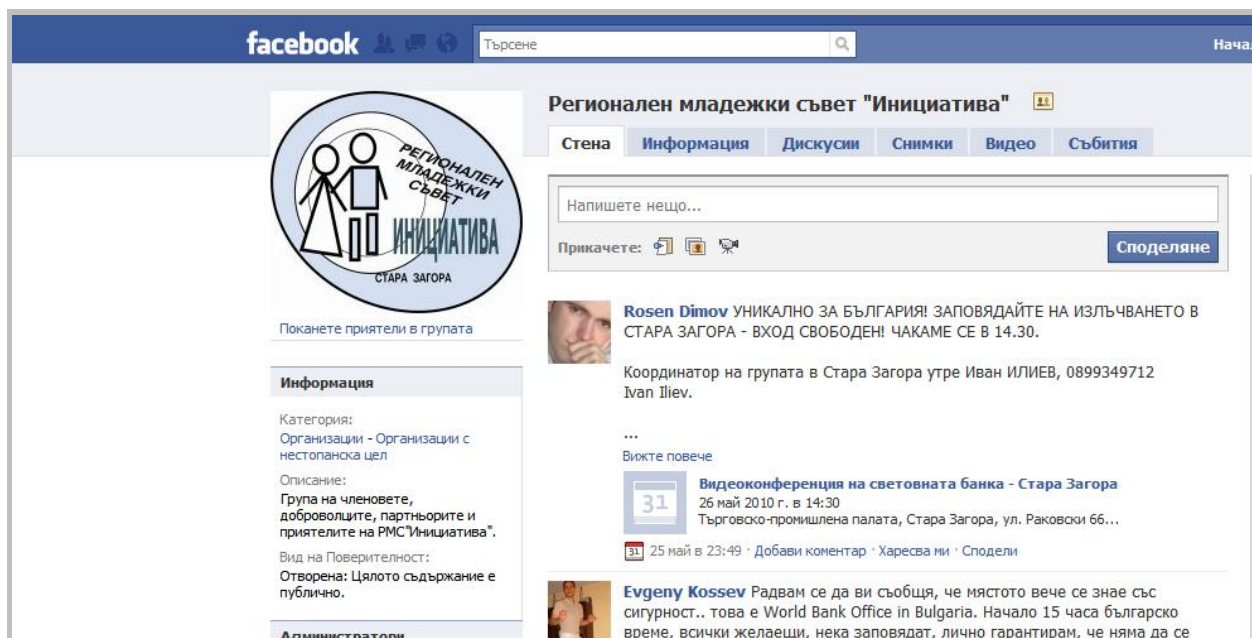


Fig. 10 RYC “Initiative” on Facebook

#### Summary:

Social media is applied to complement NGOs online communication. Profiles in social networks can even substitute the site of a respective organization. They are space where further information is shared, but what is qualitatively new about them, is that they provide the opportunity for young people to participate. The research shows, however, that young people are not taking advantage extensively, even though they seem to use social networks a lot. That means that the potential could be optimized by NGOs to promote online (and broader offline) participation. That there are posts updated on daily basis shows that organizations constantly try to engage young people. It is no exaggeration to say that in all the cases, the Internet is a tool to provide information and to promote offline activities.

Generally, the Internet is recognized by all the interviewees as a leading communication tool because of being “a window towards the world” (Alexiev 2010), easily accessible and

affordable (Kozareva 2010), widely used (Paterkova 2010) and uncensored (Stoimenov 2010). It does not exclude offline communication, however.

### *C. Offline communication*

The interviews with the NGOs representatives revealed that offline communication still has its place in fostering engagement. In the words of Paterkova (2010): “An idea cannot come true only through the Internet. You need to personally reach the people, to convey enthusiasm, emotions”. RYC “Initiative” is sending letters to other organizations, as well as to schools and local authorities. Paterkova disagrees that public institutions are not open to young people and their initiatives, saying that there are always people who are supportive and others that are not, but “you need to make the first step towards them” (Paterkova 2010). She sees the role of the organization as finding how to present information in dynamic and engaging ways. Upon organizing discussions or quizzes on topics such as the EU or citizenship, sometimes awards, games, or receptions prove to be more effective to attract those young people that are otherwise not engaged in the issues, she says. Offline communication is an effective way to provoke engagement, because after events or discussions, young people are likely to get motivated, to start thinking about the issues, and participate, whereas participation in a forum for discussions requires a preexisting interest (Paterkova 2010).

“Zelenite” and CVS also find offline communication useful. For their campaign, “Zelenite” counted on stands on the street, special low-cost events, for example a big green ball touring around Sofia and the country, “on creativity, not the conventional methods” (Stoimenov 2010). They framed their motto “To Preserve People in Bulgaria” as a continuation of the

existing Coalition of NGOs “To Preserve Nature in Bulgaria”. CVS uses flyers and placards with colorful design and memorable message. Printed materials may be expensive, but CVS sometimes receives lump sums, whereas constant financing for building up a coherent promotion strategy is lacking (Kozareva 2010). Volunteers and participants are encouraged to disseminate them and spread the word. The team also puts placards in some universities, choosing topics according to the faculties. Recently, CVS has won a project to establish volunteer clubs at different schools, and the team will travel to other cities and promote this at schools. Kozareva shares that going to schools is sometimes difficult because a special permission from the school director is needed (2010).

On the other end of the continuum is Start UP which does not find communication offline very useful in comparison to online options (Alexiev 2010). Alexiev says about using posters: “It is not so much about a great communication effect to attract more people; rather it will be seen by 5 persons who already know about Start UP, but they will really enjoy seeing a poster” (2010).

All four interviewees acknowledge the importance of face-to-face communication, as well as the value of word of mouth. To enter in the emailing list of CVS, for example, one needs to be added by someone already there, and a lot of people get to know the organization because of personally knowing someone who is already involved (Kozareva 2010). People are encouraged to disseminate information about the organizations- whether offline (CVS, “Zelenite”, RYC “Initiative”), or online (Start UP, RYC “Initiative”). The word of mouth proves to be easy, cost-efficient and also reliable technique that NGOs use to engage young people (Paterkova 2010, Kozareva 2010). At CVS events, such as international evenings, discussions, movie screenings, seminars and CVS- Uni, young people are invited to bring their friends who usually “get involved after that” (Kozareva 2010).

#### 4.3.4. Media outreach

Where the four cases differ significantly, is the media coverage they receive. Zelenite, for example, enjoy media attention as long as they organize protests or mass events, or when they pay for media presence, as during pre-election debates on the public service broadcaster (Stoimenov 2010). Start UP and CVS do even worse in their communication with the media. This could be due to lack of finances (Stoimenov 2010, Kozareva 2010), lack of know-how on how to approach the media (Alexiev 2010), or lack of interest in young civic participation on behalf of the media (Kozareva 2010).

Yet traditional media is conceptualized very differently. Stoimenov (2010) says that larger media coverage would have yielded greater mobilization effect for Zelenite, whereas according to Alexiev (2010), the effect of more media coverage will be greater visibility of the organization, but not a significantly enhanced involvement. Start UP prefers, therefore, turning to professional channels and specialized editions (such as <http://www.linux-bg.org/> or the “Manager” magazine) for media partnerships, when it comes to the promotion of events (Alexiev 2010). Zelenite managed to “break through the blackout around (them) because of the good relations to some journalists that are committed to the issues”, reveals Stoimenov (2010). For him, all kinds of media are extremely important to reach people, and that enhances the chances to engage them (Stoimenov 2010).

Only the RYC “Initiative” has stable partnerships with the local media. According to Paterkova, journalists from local newspapers, TV and radio stations, and sites want to write about the initiatives of the organization, they “feel it is important to cover those events” (2010). This media attention could be due to the fact that local media are searching for news, but it could also reflect a real interest on behalf of the smaller communities on how young people are engaged.

Paterkova talks about a leaflet for young people written by young people and disseminated with Starozagorski newspaper. Thus, young people are encouraged to share what they feel excited about, what worries them, as well as information about international projects, she comments (2010). There is also the idea to present the “new young people” as successful people (Paterkova 2010). In summary, the media do not seem particularly interested in youth NGOs, even though there are exceptions, such as the RYC “Initiative”.

#### **4.3.5. Main challenges**

Due to financial or other constraints, NGO leaders do not perceive their communication strategies as entirely successful, effective or far-reaching. Zelenite, for example, tried to reach as many people as possible, but concentrated on cities, on “the young urban citizen”, because “when you are making a concrete campaign and have a determined target group, it is good to focus the efforts towards it, because it will bring you highest results” (Stoimenov 2010). Stoimenov outlines, however, that as the only party that talks in its programs concretely and explicitly about underprivileged people, such as the disabled, Zelenite also supported the gay parade by a declaration. However, lack of resources made them limit their offline campaigns to creative, non-expensive activities in the cities, whereas the Internet was the solution for a better outreach (Stoimenov 2010).

The Internet is not seen as the best solution to reach underprivileged groups of the society by the CVS and RYC “Initiative”. Because they are dealing with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, some of them accommodated in public institutions, they rely on traditional written official communication, as well as face-to-face communication (Kozareva 2010; Paterkova 2010). On the other hand, the Internet is perceived as the easiest, cheapest and

most convenient way to reach those young people who have access to it. For those who do not have access to the Internet, such as ethnic minorities, there are different ways. Paterkova (2010) shares her experience that the best way is to contact the right persons, such as leaders of their particular organizations, who would further disseminate the information, or to organize meetings between young people, NGOs, and journalists.

Start UP, on the other hand, takes advantage of new technologies to empower disadvantage people. Thus, conferences that were taking place in Sofia were directly broadcast online, so that people outside the city or staying at home could watch them (Alexiev 2010). Start UP tries to circumvent traditional media, because some of its members are for example students from the country-side and do not have TV sets. Yet according to Alexiev, trying to circumvent the Internet in order to reach to people who do not have access will be counterproductive - it will actually kill the entrepreneurial (2010). “It is a test that you want to get to some information. It is here, you have to grab it”, he thinks (2010). Put in other words, young people have the freedom to choose whether and how to engage.

What all the interviewees mention is the lack of resources. For Zelenite and CVS, for example, insufficient funding was one of the reasons for not reaching the media, and also shortage of human resources. Both organizations rely heavily on voluntary support, which in some cases is not enough (Kozareva 2010; Stoimenov 2010). Kozareva (2010) shares that recent developments in communication, such as the blog, or a working group on promotion, are due to the internship program they created, and consequently up till now this year, there are more people participating than in the last two years. Furthermore, according to her, online participation by young people is not sought because there would not be enough human resources to process all the generated data (Kozareva 2010). For Start UP, Alexiev (2010) sees the problem connected to time required for serious engagement.

Another common challenge for the NGOs is to plan their strategies accordingly, for example taking into account what impact outside factors, such as the place, or the time, can have on their success. That was the case of Start UP and the RYC “Initiative” (Alexiev 2010; Paterkova 2010). Failing to do so reveals that know-how and professional communicators are insufficient in at least some of the Bulgarian NGOs.

Summary: Offline communication then remains important in promoting participation. Especially personal relationships seem to create trust, and are therefore more probable to enhance engagement. But the Internet has its place, too. This is particularly true when the communication is aimed at young savvy people who have access and skills to use it. As the interviewees agreed, a combination between online and offline activities yields the highest results. We need to acknowledge, that a mixed and differentiated approach is needed that is accommodated to the particular type of activity, target group, or time. Such a strategy is not only more effective, but provides opportunities to connect people who would otherwise be left behind.

All NGOs use the Internet to enhance both the knowledge and the skills of young people. Generally, all of them encourage participation more offline than online. The extent to which they provide opportunities for participation online depends on several factors, such as the kind of relationship they foster with young people, the resources for processing the data, the specifics of the audience and the organization itself.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

The research has shown that the Internet plays a very important role in the communication of NGOs. Serving as a tool for the NGOs to better communicate their values and activities, the Internet has a potential to enhance young people's participation. The Internet provides opportunities to participate online, as well as information and skills needed for offline participation. However, different situations and diverse audiences require differentiated approaches, therefore the most successful strategy to reach and involve young people is a reasonable combination between online and offline communication.

Furthermore, the respective NGOs take advantage of the potential of the Internet to engage young people but fail to utilize it. Online participation remains limited both on the side of the NGOs providing opportunities for that, and on the side of young people taking advantage of it. Opportunities for online participation are generally limited on the sites of the organizations, and social networks are used to provide more interactivity. Despite the high internet penetration in young people's lives, their usage of this technology is prevalingly passive, as far as the examined NGOs are concerned. Young people are most probably using the Internet, including social networks, for information gathering, communication and entertainment, but as the research has shown, they do not take the opportunity to contribute to online content themselves as much as they could. What is a positive feature is that networked communication is encouraged by all four organizations, thus providing hope for the development of a stronger civil society sector in the country. Generally, young people are invited more to join rather than to initiate participation, but examples of pro-activeness are not rare.



The research findings are in line with two hypotheses already established by previous research. First, national NGOs focus on offline activities and recruitment of participants, as stated in the CivicWeb project (2009, 31- 32). Secondly, even though the power of the Internet to engage the disengaged remains unexplored, positive statements about the Internet facilitating participation of the engaged can be made.

In the light of those findings, several recommendations can be made for policy makers and NGO practitioners who deal with young people. First, perceiving the Internet too optimistically as a factor to enhance civic engagement is not recommended for different reasons- diversity of young people, limited access, unproven capacity to create involvement. This relates to broader issues such as civic education and inequalities. Secondly, NGOs need to acknowledge that they should facilitate more proactive participation through more interactive channels. Thus, not only will young people be encouraged to engage, but steps towards creating a culture of civic engagement will be undertaken. Thirdly, civil society sector needs financial sustainability in order to be able to build coherent, sustained communication strategies, and this is an issue to be recognized by the public sector, as well.

The analysis was focused on one side of the communication process only- the NGOs. Further research is needed to explore the other side – the young people and how they perceive civic engagement- and to find where these two meet and where they miss each other. This will be of great use for designing better communication strategies and more engaging online spaces.

The small number of examined NGOs does not allow for generalizations, but for the reasons outlined in the methodological chapter, these findings can be considered exemplary. The very notion of civil society is embedded in European and US liberal democracies, and Bulgaria is an interesting case to examine, being an EU member state and part of the post-communist “weak” civil societies. As a whole, civic participation in Bulgaria needs enhancement, and so do the

available resources and the potential of communication strategies of the examined NGOs. Yet, as the research has shown, NGOs have started realizing the fact that the Internet has the potential to counteract the tradition of disengagement. The NGOs foster a variety of modes of and spaces for participation which can reinforce each other and prove to be more engaging taken together.

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