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A FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON POST-COMMUNIST CIVIL SOCIETY:
CONTENTIOUS ACTIVITIES AND INTERNET ACTIVISM IN LATVIA

Master's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Post-communist civil society is generally depicted to be rather weak. However, the existing academic literature is outdated and reveals conceptual issues. The incorporation of normative assumptions, focus on formal activities and establishment of universally applicable indicators has resulted in rigid operational concepts of civil society that do not sufficiently account for contentious activities and internet activism. Yet, these forms of public participation are becoming increasingly important. By adopting a functional perspective, this dissertation develops a revised operational concept of civil society that allows for assessing alternative forms of public participation in terms of their quantity and quality structure.

The framework is applied to the case of Latvia, where quantitative aspects of contentious activities and internet activism as well as the quality structure of the online CSOs ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv are investigated. The analysis yields remarkable results. Latvian civil society is not weak. The extent of both contentious activities and internet activism militate for a rather strong civil society in the country. However, the organizational infrastructure of ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv shows that financial strains serve to illustrate huge constraints on the working capacities of the organizations and, thus, need to be addressed if civil society is to be maintained and further strengthened.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The fall of the Iron Curtain and subsequent democratization of many post-communist countries revived academic debates on the importance of behavioral and attitudinal dimensions for democratic consolidation¹. The struggles between the Polish Worker's Movement and the state in the 1970s followed by large scale opposition movements all over the former Soviet Union resurrected the idea of civil society. It was seen not only as a key ingredient for the stabilization and sustainability of already existing democracies, but even as a strategy to overcome totalitarian regimes (Uhlin, 2006: 23).

The success of social movements and Popular Fronts in paving the way for political liberalization nurtured expectations that the newly established democracies of Central and Eastern Europe will be based on flourishing and active civil societies, too (Kutter & Trappmann, 2010: 42). Yet, the movements so instrumental for transition largely de-mobilized following the breakdown of communist rule and were replaced by numerous small NGOs (Uhlin, 2006: 59). Academic scholars nearly unanimously agree that both structural and cultural features of post-communist civil society are comparatively less developed, which is why civil society is generally depicted to be rather weak in the region².

However, two forms of participation have not been sufficiently looked at by previous research: contentious activities and internet activism. While there is not only a lack of more current accounts of post-communist civil society especially after the mid-2000s, existing studies also reveal conceptual issues, which prevent them from investigating such alternative activities. Civil society is often defined on the basis of

¹ According to minimalist definitions dominating the academic literature until then, a country is classified as democratic in the sense that free, competitive, and regular elections are being held. For instance, Schumpeter argues that democracy "(...) is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people's vote." (Schumpeter, 2003: 269) Similarly, Huntington defines "(...) a twentieth-century political system as democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote." (Huntington, 1991: 7)

² A detailed summary of previous research on post-Soviet civil society is given in third chapter „Previous Research on Post-Communist Civil Society“.

what it should look like by means of incorporating normative assumptions, focusing on formal activities only or putting in great efforts to developing universally applicable indicators. “Uncivil”, more confrontational or informal activities are thus excluded from such conceptualizations. Yet, they are symptoms of a changing political culture that is becoming more critical of political authority and prefers elite-challenging rather than traditional activities in formal organizations (Norris, 2002: 197). In order to give a representative picture of the state of affairs of civil society, it is therefore essential to fully include them in any research agenda investigating this topic.

In contrast to many previous studies, this dissertation argues for the adoption of a functional perspective that looks at what civil society is composed of rather than which forms it can take. A comprehensive operational concept will be developed and concretized by means of specific indicators to allow for an investigation of the quantity and quality structure of civil society, especially in terms of contentious activities and internet activism. Thereby, the goal of this paper is not only to fill in the theoretical gap left by the existing academic literature but also contribute to a more thorough and representative account of post-communist civil society.

Hence, in the second part of the dissertation, the indicators to measure contentious activities and internet activism will be applied to the case of Latvia. Latvia was chosen, because the alleged weakness of civil society in the country seems to be puzzling in the light of recent developments. Measured on the basis of traditional indicators, Latvian civil society is found to be rather weak until 2004 (Uhlin, 2010). Yet, contentious activities and internet activism have become increasingly widespread in the last decade and recognized by think tanks and international news agencies alike. Latvia makes headlines with the so-called “Umbrella Revolution”, “Penguin Revolution” and flourishing online communities (Rozenvalds & Iljabis, 2009: 28; McGrane, 2013). These observations immediately suggest the question of whether Latvian civil society is still weak. Thus far, no answer has been given. There are barely any accounts of Latvian civil society after the mid-2000s and there is even less research trying to broaden the perspective beyond NGOs (Uhlin, 2010: 830). By means of the operational concept developed in the first, theoretical part of this dissertation, the debate on Latvian civil society will be revisited and its quantity and quality structure in terms

of contentious activities and internet activism investigated. Two research questions guide the analysis:

- (1) What is the magnitude and, thus, extent and depth of public participation in contentious activities and internet activism in Latvia?
- (2) What is the organizational infrastructure of Latvian online civil society organizations composed of?

The research questions will be answered using two different methods. The former will be addressed by an extensive secondary data and literature review. The second research question will be dealt with on the basis of several expert interviews that were conducted with former or current employees and volunteers working for two of the most prominent online CSOs in Latvia: ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv. The results of the study are remarkable: Latvian civil society when measured on the basis of contentious activities and internet activism is not weak. People are participating in large numbers to make their claims heard and engage in politically and socially relevant activities that clearly affect the political decision-making process and at times bring about legislative changes. Nevertheless, the organizational infrastructure shows weak points that severely influence the functionality of online civil society organizations. Financial difficulties and staff shortages are the main challenges that have to be dealt with, if civil society is to be maintained and further strengthened.

The dissertation is organized into eight chapters. The introduction is followed by a literature review to define civil society and explain motivations underlying its investigation. The third chapter looks at the state of affairs of civil society in the post-communist region and summarizes findings made by existing studies. After giving an account of independent variables put forward in the academic literature to explain the weakness of post-communist civil society, methodological issues and conceptual problems will be brought into the focus. The fourth chapter argues for the importance of both contentious activities and internet activism for civil society and puts forward a new, revised operational concept that allows for investigating these alternative means of participation. The fifth chapter introduces the case study of Latvia. This is followed by chapter six, which examines the quantity structure of both contentious activities and internet activism. The seventh chapter contains the analysis of the quality structure of

civil society and investigates the organizational infrastructure of the Latvian online CSOs ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv. Finally, major findings are summarized in the conclusion, followed by an outlook for future research.

2. FRAMING CIVIL SOCIETY

Since its resurrection in the 1970s, there has been a dramatic increase in the application of the concept of civil society by academics, policy-makers, the international aid system and civil society practitioners alike. While it is generally accepted that civil society embodies a universal notion of collective voluntary action, usages and interpretations of the term vary widely. This is also reflected in the large number of different research agendas attempting to measure civil society. It appears that civil society is an extremely complex and contested concept. For the purpose of this paper, it thus seems essential to discuss different ways of how it has been used in the literature. In the following, conceptualizations of civil society that have dominated academic writings thus far will be summarized before its importance for democracy will be outlined.

2.1. Existing Conceptualizations of Civil Society

Much of the contemporary literature on civil society takes its inspiration from Alexis de Tocqueville's elaborations on democracy in America (1835/1840), in which he defines participation in social associations as the bedrock of democracy: "[I]n democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made." (de Tocqueville, 1840) By monitoring the government and ensuring the distribution of power, self-governing organizations serve as the major protection against the tyranny of the majority and an all too powerful state. According to de Tocqueville, voluntary participation in organizations unites equal but weak democratic individuals into powerful groups that work for the common good. Simultaneously, they are schools for democracy, where citizens are educated to participate in public affairs (Hyden, 1997: 6-7). Tocqueville's deliberations also serve to illustrate the foundation of what has been termed the associational school, which measures civil society primarily on the basis of associational and organizational membership.

In 1963, Almond and Verba were the first to add an attitudinal perspective to the concept of civil society. The authors argue that voluntary associations are socializing agencies fostering the cultivation of a mixed pattern of attitudes, which they refer to as political culture. The latter is defined as “(...) political orientations – attitudes towards the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of the self in the system.” (Almond & Verba, 1965: 12) Ideally, in a democracy there would be a balanced mixture of parochial, subject and participatory types of political culture, which are defined on the basis of different degrees of activism and interest in the decision-making process (Almond & Verba, 1965: 371)³. The authors term this appearance “civic culture”, which also determines the stability and effectiveness of a democratic government (Almond & Verba, 1965: 366).

The importance of attitudes for democracy has also been advocated by Inglehart. He argues that socioeconomic development results in cultural modernization, which strengthens civil society and makes democracy increasingly likely. People begin to prioritize secular-rational and emancipative values over traditional and survival values, which empower humans to be able and willing to devote themselves to issues going beyond their immediate, material needs (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005: 33). These values produce “(...) a culture of trust and tolerance, in which people place a relatively high value on individual freedom and self-expression, and have activist political orientations.” (Inglehart, 2006: 69)

Putnam (1993), in turn, has argued that civic traditions generate a civic community, which determines the degree of institutional performance and economic development (Putnam, 1993: 162). Thereby, the author stresses the importance of both structural and cultural factors. Thus, civic community promotes social capital, which is defined as “(...) connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” (Putnam, 2000: 19) Participation in networks allows citizens to adopt democratic values such as political equality, solidarity, interpersonal trust and tolerance (Putnam, 1993: 87-89). At the same time, it improves efficiency in society by facilitating coordination (Putnam, 1993: 167).

³ Parochial refers to citizens, who expect nothing of politics and do not intend to get involved. Subject types are people, who are interested in political results, but do not attempt to influence them. Participatory characterizes citizens, who actively participate in politics and other associations and are interested in the outcomes of political decision-making (Almond & Verba, 1965: 16-18).

According to Putnam's findings, social capital has important consequences for democracy, because it facilitates political participation and good governance.

Two claims appear to be striking here. On the one hand, it is argued that activities and groups that are far removed from the political sphere, including "(...) neighborhood associations, choral societies, cooperatives, sports clubs (...)" (Putnam, 1993: 173), are instrumental all the same in promoting civic norms, building social capital and, thus, creating the bonds of social life that are the basis of civil society and democracy. This argument should not be accepted without some qualifications. It was in fact proven that both political and less political civil society organizations (CSOs) are important, yet, Uhlin (2009) argues that they fulfill different purposes: while the former are good for institutional aspects of democracy such as checking state power and interest articulation, the latter tend to be better "(...) for promoting democratic values and enhancing the individual's capacity for political participation." (Uhlin, 2009: 281) Furthermore, Howard and Gilbert (2008: 18) show that positive effects on, for instance, political action, life satisfaction and interpersonal trust, also depend on the degree of civic involvement. Membership alone is certainly less conducive to the overall development of civil society than voluntary work or active participation in these organizations.

On the other hand, the conceptualizations of civil society outlined above tend to incorporate a large amount of normative assumption. For instance, democracy only benefits from social capital that is promoting democratic values as well as networks organized democratically. Civil society based on this theory is thus portrayed as inherently good.

A different, more empirical-analytical take on civil society has been adopted by Linz and Stepan (1996). According to their definition, "(...) civil society refers to that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests." (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 7) The authors argue that civil society does not only include civil associations, but also social movements and ordinary citizens who are not part of any organization.

According to Linz and Stepan (1996), civil society is one of five arenas that have to exist or to be established for a democracy to be consolidated with the other four being

political society, economic society, the rule of law and state bureaucracy (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 7). While state bureaucracy and the rule of law serve to illustrate the legal-rational institutions and organizing principles providing the essential framework of the political system, political, economic and civil society consist of people shaping and defining its character⁴ (Howard, 2003: 34). Moreover, there is a clear distinction between the private and public sphere. The five arenas belong to the public sphere and should therefore not include any family and friendship networks.

Democracy's five arenas are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Civil society, for instance, is placed within the wider framework of the rule of law, which establishes its legal guarantees. The state apparatus in turn has to enforce these laws. Moreover, the economic society provides the budget for the pluralism and autonomy of civil as well as political society. The interests and values of civil society are the major generators of the political society. Simultaneously, it also helps to monitor the state bureaucracy and economic society (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 14).

However, it is also essential to mention that in reality these arenas are never completely autonomous from each other and there is a significant degree of overlap between all of them. The latter may be direct, for example financially or in terms of personnel, or indirect, for instance through political parties. Civil society organizations (CSOs) can include or be closely linked with political parties sharing their cause. Moreover, they can educate new political leaders and parties, which has been the case during the post-communist transition. Many CSOs are also financed by or financially fully dependent on the national state or foreign sources. In post-communist Europe, for example, Western states and private foundations have made substantial investments in civil society and for NGOs to be established and to launch international aid programs. Civil society is thus not merely a domestic phenomenon, but - especially with regards to financial support - expands beyond national borders and is therefore also a global concept. Financial independence from other (arenas of) democratic polities should therefore not be interpreted too rigidly (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003: 5-7). "CSOs can (at

⁴ Political society is defined as "(...) political parties, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, interplay alliances, and legislature (...)" and, thus, refers to the institutions "(...) by which society constitutes itself politically to select and monitor democratic government." (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 8) Economic society refers to the "(...) set of socio-politically crafted and socio-politically accepted norms, institutions, and regulations, which (...) mediate between state and market" (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 11), i.e. business organizations.

times) even be fully dependent upon the state in the sense of receiving their full budget from the state. The key point is that they are not legally part of the state structure; in other words, they should enjoy at least formal independence.” (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003: 7)

2.2. Civil Society and Democracy

Based on the discussion, several functions of civil society for democracy can be identified. First of all, civil society provides checks and balances to the executive power by monitoring and restraining the state’s exertion of power. The influence it has on the political sphere reflects explicit democracy-building capacities. Secondly, civil society stimulates political participation by imparting the necessary skills and teaching attitudes that are in support of public activism and interest in politics. Thereby, it also recruits and trains new political leaders. Third, civil society creates channels for the articulation, aggregation and representation of diverse interests and, therefore, provides opportunities for political participation and influence. This is especially important for minorities. Moreover, such a forum also encourages tolerance for different viewpoints and a greater readiness for compromise. Fourth, civil society disseminates information by providing alternative news and perspectives. It thus increases awareness and makes it harder for political malpractice to be covered up. Finally, by improving accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, effectiveness and, thus, legitimacy of the government, citizens are more respectful of the state and also more likely to participate. This, in turn, improves the ability of the state to govern (Diamond, 1994: 7-11).

Based on this reasoning, civil society appears to be among the key characteristics determining the process of democratic consolidation and sustainability. It is a highly important subject to study when interested in new democracies and democratization. In comparison with established democracies, those of the third wave are yet to mature, which is why civil society can only draw on a short history of democracy that provides the enabling environment for it to flourish. Investigating the development and current state of civil society in these countries is therefore extremely important.

In the academic literature addressing civil society, the new democracies of the post-Soviet region have attracted a lot of attention. The contribution of social movements and Popular Fronts to the transition from communism to democracy is uncontested. They largely set the course for independence and, thus, nurtured hopes that the newly established states would be able to draw upon active and strong civil societies, too (Kutter & Trappmann, 2010: 42). However, the movements so instrumental for transition largely de-mobilized following the breakdown of communist rule and were often replaced by numerous small NGOs (Uhlin, 2006: 59). In the following, previous findings on the development of post-communist civil society will be summarized and independent variables, that have been suggested to account for its weakness, presented. A closer look will also be taken at the existing operational concepts of civil society presented in these studies.

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON POST-COMMUNIST CIVIL SOCIETY

Before summarizing the main findings of existing research on post-Soviet civil society, a few remarks on the operationalization of the concept need to be made. Despite a variety of definitions and interpretations, existing operational concepts of civil society reveal a considerable degree of similarity in that they focus particularly on two components: structural and cultural aspects of civil society. The former relates to the makeup of civil society both in terms of its quantity and quality. Hence, when investigating the quantity structure one is interested in the extent and form of participation. What is the magnitude of civil society and which of its activities do people engage in? The quality structure, in contrast, is concerned with the organizational infrastructure of civil society, which focuses for example on the diversity of participants, level of organization and resources of CSOs and the inter-relations between them. This allows for investigating how civil society operates and activists organize themselves (Heinrich, 2005: 218). While the quantity structure is usually measured on the individual level, for example on the basis of large population surveys, the quality structure serves to illustrate an in-depth assessment of CSOs and is usually assessed on the organizational level, for instance via expert interviews of activists.

The second main component, cultural aspects, assumes that civil society is a public sphere, in which specific norms and values are developed and internalized. “The inclusion of such features acknowledges the fact that the characteristics of civil society are not solely defined by its overall size and vibrancy (structure), but also by the specific motivations and norms guiding the actions of its members (culture).” (Heinrich, 2005: 218) Scholars investigating cultural facets mainly examine the extent to which, for example, democratic values, solidarity and trust are present in civil society. However, there are only a few studies which empirically examine cultural features. Most of them focus on structural aspects of civil society.

3.1. The Weakness of Post-Communist Civil Society

Clearly inspired by the associational school, Howard (2003) investigates the structural quantity of civil society in the post-communist region on the basis of organizational membership. Using data from the 1995-1997 World Values Survey, the author shows that associational membership is distinctively lower in post-communist countries when compared to other regions in the world, including older, Western democracies and post-authoritarian states of Latin America and Southern Europe respectively. This is true for all kinds of organizations and associations, except for labor unions (Howard, 2003: 63-67). Among post-Soviet countries, Russia and the Baltic States together with Ukraine and Bulgaria, feature the lowest percentage of organizational membership (Howard, 2003: 74). The author also finds that there is a drop in membership in all post-communist states but Slovenia and Romania since 1990-1991 (Howard, 2003: 71).

Beyond organizational membership, Hoskins and Mascherini (2009: 477) measure the extent of unconventional forms of participation, such as demonstrations, petitions and boycotts. Based on 2002 European Social Survey data, their study focuses on 19 European countries, including Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. The results indicate that participation in unconventional activities is but average in the Central and Eastern European countries as opposed to the remaining European states, while membership in political and social organizations is fairly low. With regards to unconventional participation in terms of signing a petition, Inglehart and Catterberg (2002: 306) even identify a negative trend in all post-communist countries. While the number of those having signed a petition rose substantially in rich democracies, it fell significantly in the post-Soviet region between 1990 and 2000. Thus, the latter do not only score low on the extent of participation but in parts it actually seems to diminish. Apart from the structural dimension, Hoskins and Mascherini (2009: 478) also show that Slovenia and Hungary have less developed democratic values, including tolerance and solidarity, and, therefore, reveal that cultural aspects are rather poorly developed, too.

Uhlin (2006) measures both the quantity and quality structure of civil society in the Baltic States and Russia in 1999 and 2000. However, his analysis is based on interviews with elites of CSOs and, thus, focuses on the organizational level. Regarding the quantity structure, Uhlin's (2006) findings confirm previous conclusions. He shows

that mass movements are uncommon in the region and civil society groups typically have relatively few members (Uhlin, 2006: 59-60).

Moreover, Uhlin's (2006) assessment of civil society's quality structure reveals that activists are generally highly educated, mostly middle-aged and a large part of them female. Among the respondents, 81% claim to have completed higher education, which indicates that CSOs work on a very professional basis. A majority of them, 56%, is between 41 and 60 years old and only 11% 30 years old or younger. This underlines that CSOs have difficulties in recruiting and mobilizing new members from younger cohorts, which in turn might limit their sustainability. Moreover, even though CSOs are characterized by relative gender equality with 48% of respondents being female, it is argued that this may be a sign for their overall weakness, too. The societies of the Baltic States and Russia are rather patriarchic with men usually occupying important and powerful positions in politics and economics. Women's prevalence in CSOs could therefore indicate that civil society's influence and voice is but marginal (Uhlin, 2006: 65-67). Apart from severe problems in mobilizing human resources, Uhlin (2006: 68) also points out that CSOs face major difficulties in finding adequate sources of funding. CSOs largely engage in conventional activities, such as information gathering and public education. However, networking and cooperation among civil society groups is a common activity, too (Uhlin, 2006: 74-76).

Nevertheless, Uhlin (2006: 90) indicates that the relationship between civil society and the state is weak. According to the author, CSOs in Russia, Latvia and Lithuania have low trust in state institutions (Uhlin, 2006: 131). Moreover, Mishler and Rose (1997) add that post-communist citizens in general are largely skeptical not only of political but also civil society organizations. Compared to Western democracies, there is a substantial "trust deficit" in post-communist societies (Mishler & Rose, 1997: 446). Norris (2002: 151) also shows that social trust is significantly lower in Central and Eastern Europe than the global average. According to prevailing theories, the lack of trust is detrimental for civil society: trust is a pre-condition for social capital to be produced, it is essential for individuals to participate voluntarily in collective action without being afraid that others will defect on them (Putnam, 1993). The lack of trust in the post-communist region hence further supports arguments on the weakness of civil society.

A modification of these conclusions is given by Petrova and Tarrow (2007). While differentiating between individual and relational dimensions of civil participation, the authors argue that civil society is indeed weak on the former with little participation in organizations; yet, it is characterized by a relatively strong “transactional activism”. Hence, ties among the numerous civil society organizations and between them and state officials are developing and strengthening (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007: 84). This perspective on civil society is rather elitist; yet, it does not imply that the latter is necessarily weak. However, while their observation goes along with Uhlin’s (2006) findings that networking is a common activity among civil society groups, Uhlin (2006) also shows that CSOs are highly non-political in their activities and confrontational actions barely exist. He therefore concludes that their democratic function as a check against and influence on state power is hardly fulfilled (Uhlin, 2010: 844), which also puts serious doubts on the strength of “transactional activism” in the region as advocated by Petrova and Tarrow (2007).

In the academic literature, a number of independent variables explaining the weakness of post-communist civil society are outlined, which can be broadly distinguished by either focusing on historical-cultural or structural-attitudinal accounts. Historical factors mainly relate to the “legacy of socialism” and the specific imprints left by communism on individuals socialized within the system. The experience of communist rule in general and the extraordinary penetration of the party system in particular are said to influence people’s behavior until now (Bunce, 1999: 23). With regards to civil society, it is argued that prior communist experience has a negative impact on organizational membership, which increases with longer exposure to communism (Howard, 2003: 90; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2013: 62). According to Howard (2003: 105-109), there are two specific aspects of the communist experience that make citizens of post-Soviet countries much less likely to join organizations: (1) mistrust in post-communist institutions and (2) persistence of friendship networks.

The first point relates to the fact that the communist system rejected civic law as well as individual rights and prevented the existence of any associational life, political organization or social movement separate from the party state’s institutional web. Civil society was neither autonomous nor voluntary and participation was often coerced or undertaken for instrumentalist purposes to obtain scarce goods, increase wealth or

advance one's career, which would otherwise not have been possible. These formative experiences have led people to distrust and avoid voluntary organizations until today.

Secondly, individuals within socialist systems often divided their personalities into a public and conformist self on the one and a more rebellious self on the other hand (Bunce, 1999: 30). While being suppressed by the system on the outside, they formed trusting ties with friends and family, which allowed them to speak up their mind more openly in private or to compensate for shortages in the command economy by exchanging scarce goods or services. The persistence of these vibrant friendship networks has reduced the need or desire of post-communist citizens to engage in other organizations (Howard, 2003: 107). This hypothesis is however contested. According to Gibson (2001: 59), for instance, Russian society is characterized by extensive social networks that are often transcending family units. The strength of strong as opposed to weak ties thus seems to be questionable. In fact, Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2013: 61) have shown that informal friendship networks are no significant indicator in explaining the post-communist participatory deficit.

Apart from historical explanations, structural factors are found to have strong effects on civil society, too. This is especially true for political and economic developments during the transition, which have resulted in what Howard (2003: 109) terms "post-communist disappointment" or Inglehart and Catterberg (2002: 304) refer to as "post-honeymoon effect". According to the authors, the fall of the Iron Curtain was accompanied by high expectations to which reality could not live up. People thought that democracy will not only provide civil liberties but also improve economic well-being. Yet, a too idealistic belief in real influence on democratic politics from below resulted in growing frustrations among those politically involved or interested in being active (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002: 304). Moreover, drastic changes and radical reforms implemented to facilitate the rapid transition from command to market economy often caused a combination of deep recession, high inflation and rising unemployment during much of the 1990s (Tucker & Pop-Eleches, 2011: 387). Both developments translate into democratic disillusionment, including doubts about the efficacy of democratic participation and, hence, increasing passivity and withdrawal.

Beyond democratic disillusionment, those experiencing economic crises and increased poverty in the transition period also developed a sense of unpredictability and

insecurity, which leads them to emphasize survival as opposed to self-expression values (Inglehart, 2006: 72). However, as outlined earlier, the latter produce a culture of trust and tolerance, which is vital for civil society (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005: 227). The trauma of the transitional economic crises is thus shown to explain parts of the low post-communist organizational membership, too (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2013: 60).

Moreover, trust is arguably affected by the rise of a culture of corruption in the post-transition era. According to Zakaria (2013: 367-368), the perception of corruption influences civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. It can interact with variances in trust in others and the government and ultimately affect organizational membership and, hence, civil society. According to Zakaria (2013: 354), corruption has replaced Soviet legacy as the main explanation for the weakness of post-communist civil society.

Finally, scholars maintain that the elitist character of many CSOs also contributes to the weakness. Instead of being established from below, most of them have been set up from above in order to attract foreign funding, which they need due to a lack of local resources. Thereby, they prioritize tasks reflecting the interests of foreign donors and less time is devoted to public outreach. This has largely resulted in a detachment of CSOs from the general public, which is why most people are ignorant of them or believe their work to be irrelevant. The current, rapid decline of foreign funding also puts a question mark on the sustainability of such elitist organizations (Fagan, 2005: 529; Kutter & Trappmann, 2010: 47; Uhlin, 2010: 849).

In sum, one can therefore conclude that post-Soviet civil society seems to be rather weak both in terms of its quantity and quality structure as well as cultural aspects. Organizational membership and unconventional forms of participation as well as CSOs' infrastructure, notably in Russia and the Baltic States, are fairly poorly developed. Independent variables to account for the weakness of post-communist civil society are either historical-cultural pointing to the "Soviet legacy" or structural-attitudinal, including democratic disillusionment, transitional economic crises, corruption, as well as the elitist character of many CSOs.

3.2. Previous Research and Methodology

What is most striking about the studies presented thus far is that they almost exclusively focus on associational membership as the sole empirical manifestation of the quantity structure of civil society and only a few deal with unconventional forms of participation. Civil society is judged to be weak due to low organizational membership or low turnouts in legal demonstrations, boycotts or petitions respectively. Certainly, Uhlin (2006) broadens the dependent variable to include qualitative aspects. However, his sample also includes only the most common forms of CSOs, namely NGOs and rather formal associations. Hence, the operational concept of civil society is reduced to a limited number of indicators only. A couple of methodological factors have led to such an exclusive research agenda of civil society.

First of all, many studies of civil society tend to be highly normative both in their conceptualizations and in their theoretical assumptions. This is especially true for research originating from the Anglo-American school, which is often informed by the Western, democratic context civil society was first investigated in by de Tocqueville. Howard (2003), for instance, maintains that “(...) groups belonging to civil society must follow the general liberal democratic principles that have long been associated with its development” (Howard, 2003: 41). Civil society as such is depicted as inherently good, carrying a certain set of values and social virtues, such as civility, internal democracy, tolerance and solidarity, which also define its boundaries (Heinrich, 2005: 213). Thus, only a limited number of pro-democratic organizations and activities are included in the definition of civil society, while the rest is excluded from its realm a priori or assigned to such residual categories as “uncivil society” (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003: 2).

Secondly, it is assumed that “[c]ivil society requires a degree of routinization and institutionalization (...)” (Howard, 2003: 39), which is why less structured and informal types of organizations are often omitted. On the other hand, it can be very difficult to identify civil society actors that are not registered with authorities. Hence, much of the civil society literature tends to focus on membership and participation in formally organized, permanent and long-established groups, clubs or associations, while other forms of mobilization, especially civil activities outside organizations, are excluded, even though they are key characteristics of the concept of civil society. This

approach thus calls into question the conceptual validity of such studies (Heinrich, 2005: 217).

Thirdly, because civil society is often assessed on the basis of cross-country comparisons, only a limited number of supposedly universally applicable indicators are investigated. Yet, such an approach fails to account for the context-specificity of civil society, which is determined by a multiplicity of social, political, cultural and economic factors at the individual, community, national or international level respectively. Civil society does not manifest itself in identical forms in all regions of the world and might differ in post-communist as opposed to Western countries. Nevertheless, survey items employed to measure the strength of civil society usually list specific organizational types or unconventional activities, of which respondents might be a member or have participated in. Context-specific activities or organizations are not accounted for in such operationalizations, which also casts doubts on the validity of cross-country comparisons (Heinrich, 2005: 222).

Due to normative assumptions, the exclusion of episodic activities and rigid comparability standards, a number of groups and activities have not been sufficiently investigated by previous research on civil society. In order to account for alternative forms of participation, a new understanding and, thus, conceptualization of civil society is required.

4. TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Existing studies on civil society have not focused sufficiently on alternative forms of participation, which is especially true for ‘uncivil’ social movements, contentious action and internet activism. In the following, their importance as key aspects of civil society will be highlighted before developing a new operational concept, which allows for broadening the dependent variable to include these activities.

4.1. Contentious Activities and Internet Activism

In contrast to traditional organizations, such as NGOs, social movements have more far-reaching goals and employ more confrontational means to achieve them. For example, they use contentious activities to resist or promote social change. Moreover, movements are usually mass-based and have a diffuse structure. They consist of many different organizations and individuals that are more or less closely related to each other (Uhlir, 2006: 25-26). Contentious activities, in turn, describe undertakings that are more disruptive to the everyday life in the polity than conventional means of participation, such as associational membership. They encompass both unconventional forms of activities, meaning participation in legal demonstrations, boycotts or signing a petition, and illegal or violent protest activities, including riots and at times strikes. Tilly (2008) defines contentious performances as “(...) interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interest, in which government appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.” (Tilly, 2008: 5)

The purposes and violent aspects of social movements and contentious activities are often perceived as a threat to democracy, because they appear as a challenge to the integrity of the state. From a normative perspective, they are called “uncivil” and thus excluded from civil society. At the same time, they “(...) tend to come and go, or rise and fall, more frequently than the more ‘normal’ or everyday types of voluntary organizations.” (Howard, 2003: 40) Their episodic appearance further adds to their omission in previous research on civil society. Yet, ignoring them appears to be

problematic especially when looking at the post-communist context, because independence and national movements were the main drivers of the transition to democracy in late communism and have, in fact, been treated as signs of a strong civil society before, for instance in Slovenia (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003: 3; Kuzmanic, 1994 in Kopecky & Mudde, 2003: 3). Excluding them today does not make sense empirically and underlines the problem of conceptual validity present in many of the existing studies (Mudde, 2007: 161).

Moreover, it is argued that they play an important role in the process of democratization, too. They do not only provoke “civil” counter-movements in response to their challenges (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003: 4)⁵, but also function as socializing schools for participating in a democracy. Letki (2004), for instance, shows that membership in the Communist Party before 1989 serves as a relatively good predictor for political engagement later on. Clearly, the Communist Party is an “uncivil” organization from a normative perspective. However, these findings suggest that participation “(...) in a non-democratic organization can be an efficient school for democracy.” (Letki, 2004: 675) Hence, the positive effects of such “uncivil” forms of participation challenge the normative perspective on civil society altogether.

At the same time, contentious action and social movements are said to be more authentic representations of civil society in the post-communist context. Unlike NGOs which are largely detached from society, “(...) many ‘uncivil’ organizations are true social movements, that is, involved in grass-roots supported (contentious) politics.” (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003: 4) As shown by their important role in late communism, they have largely determined the picture of civil society in the post-Soviet region. Cross-country comparisons, which do not consider these types of rather informal activities, thus miss out on important aspects of civil society specifically in post-Soviet countries and therefore lose validity.

However, it is not only for reasons of methodological coherence that the dependent variable should be widened to include “uncivil” groups and contentious activities. In fact, it is argued that their magnitude has risen dramatically during the late twentieth century with an ever growing proportion of citizens engaging in them. Publics

⁵ An example is the 2005 march of the radically right-wing “National Power Union” in Latvia, which resulted in mass-counter protests (Kalacinska, 2010: 45).

are becoming more critical of authority in general and political authority in particular, which is why they are less likely to passively attend meetings of elite-directed organizations but much more inclined to participate in activities that challenge elite decisions (Norris, 2002: 197). Hence, stagnating or declining participation in conventional organizations as well as distrust against all kinds of institutions should not be seen as an indication for the alleged weakness of civil society, since “[T]he public is not withdrawing from civic action in the broader sense.” (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002: 302) Instead, there is a change in the style of participation, and alternative forms and channels through which civil society manifests itself are increasingly widespread (Dalton, 2006: 11).

A development that has further spurred the rise of contentious activities and alternative movements is certainly the advent of the internet and other ICTs. Online blogs, social and political communities, forums, alternative news sites and many more seem to appear out of nowhere and are dramatically growing on a daily basis. They have increased the possibilities for individuals to exchange ideas, cooperate with one another and take collective action beyond traditional frameworks of face-to-face interaction (Shirky, 2008: 20-21). Hence, the internet and social media⁶ in particular have revolutionized the public sphere⁷, in which civil society acts. Therefore, social scientists “(...) face the need to adapt traditional concepts and review established explanations of attitudes and behaviors.” (Anduiza, Cantijoch & Gallego, 2009: 872)

In the academic literature, numerous instances of the enabling capacity of the internet for civil society can be found. Campante, Durante and Sobbrío (2013: 26), for example, show that it has distinct positive impacts on contentious activities. On the one hand, it facilitates the formation and development of grass-roots online protest groups. On the other hand, it is associated with increasing voter participation in referenda. Both factors eventually feed back into the mainstream electoral process. One of the most

⁶ Social media is defined as “(...) a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009: 61) Among the most prominent examples of social media are certainly Facebook and Twitter.

⁷ Here, the public sphere is referred to as “(...) a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere – that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities.” (Habermas, Lennox & Lennox, 1964: 50)

prominent examples of the power of the internet are certainly the 1999 demonstrations in Seattle, during which a Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization was successfully halted (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012: 5). An international civil society website provided hourly updates to 700 NGOs in 80 countries, uniting numerous, diverse groups, including (but not limited to) environmentalists, students, religious and human rights groups and trade unions (Norris, 2002: 208). Since then, the internet and social media are used as powerful tools to create networks among people and push for social and political change. During the events that have been captured as the Arab Spring, for instance, rebels posting on Facebook and Twitter nurtured political uprisings in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt among others. The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, which spread from the United States all the way to Europe and beyond, was also organized and networked largely online. Castells (2012: 3) identifies even more examples of such “Networks of Outrage and Hope” that are making use of the online public sphere, for instance in Spain, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Great Britain and Israel. According to the author, “[F]or new social movements, the Internet provides the essential debate, their means of acting on people’s mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon.” (Castells, 2007: 250) However, the internet is not only beneficial to social movements. According to Obar, Zube and Lampe (2012: 20), social media help all kinds of advocacy groups⁸ in extending their public outreach, raising awareness about their activities, facilitating mobilization and creating efficient feedback loops. Furthermore, Farrell and Drezner (2008: 28) argue that blogs written by individual actors may have real political consequences by framing political debates and creating focal points for the media as a whole.

The online sphere is characterized by a number of factors, which contribute to its popularity and importance for civil engagement and collective action, including (1) locally unbound interaction, (2) autonomy, and (3) anonymity. First of all, the internet is not bound to the physical and temporal limits imposed by the offline world, but is always and everywhere accessible provided that an internet connection exists. In contrast to traditional associations and organizations, internet users do not have to physically meet at a specific place and point in time in order to interact. It therefore

⁸ According to the authors, advocacy groups include “(...) non-governmental organizations (NGOs), lobby organizations, pressure groups, activist groups, or social movement organizations.” (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012: 4)

allows for more flexibility and modifies the costs of participation, which in the offline world might be too high for citizens with limited time, money or cognitive and organizational resources (Anduiza, Cantijoch & Gallego, 2009: 865).

Moreover, messages produced online can be “(...) processed from many-to-many with the potential of reaching a multiplicity of receives and connecting endless networks that transmit digitized information around the neighborhood or around the world.” (Castells, 2012: 6-7) Hence, the internet is not only a place where a multitude of locally dispersed individuals can interact, pool resources and form groups in order to advance their interests, but also a means through which already existing advocacy groups can get their message across more effectively and reach a potentially unlimited number of people. It also serves to illustrate a new space for political mobilization. In contrast to face-to-face or telephone contact, marginal costs of sending another e-mail, newsletter or comment in a forum are practically non-existent. At the same time, participation is more decentralized as virtually everybody with an internet connection can write blogs, e-mails and establish online communities. According to Anduiza, Cantijoch and Gallego (2009), “[I]t seems logical to suppose that the existence of a new, low-cost, decentralized medium of mobilization will result in a greater number of appeals to participate, which in turn might result in an increase in political participation.” (Anduiza, Cantijoch & Gallego, 2009: 869)

Secondly, internet social networks are not only characterized by mass- but also self-communication, because “(...) the production of the message is autonomously decided by the sender, the designation of the receiver is self-directed and the retrieval of messages from the networks of communication is self-selected.” (Castells, 2012: 6-7) The combination of both mass- and self-communication makes it incredibly difficult for governments and corporations to control and regulate the content produced online. With regards to the post-communist region, the freedom of the internet allowing online communities to be more autonomous from other arenas of the democratic polity might attract actors and activists that were usually indifferent to or not willing to join any traditional CSO, because they associated them with communist organizations.

Furthermore, research undertaken by Obar, Zube and Lampe (2012) suggests that social media help to transcend financial constraints that serve to illustrate a barrier “(...) to engage in policy battles dominated by large groups (...)” (Obar, Zube &

Lampe, 2012: 18), particularly for smaller organizations. Most social media are free and the maintenance of a webpage usually cheaper than that of an entire office. The cost-effectiveness of the internet makes groups less dependent on state or foreign funding and, thus, increases the autonomy vis-à-vis the latter. Thereby, more resources can be dedicated to public outreach activities. Hence, CSOs can be less elitist and more people-oriented.

Finally, because it is so difficult to control, the internet guarantees a certain degree of autonomy and, thus, safety if so required. It allows people to speak up their mind, when they otherwise would be reluctant to do so, for example due to fear of prosecution or public perception. Simultaneously, they might find like-minded individuals, who they would not dare to talk to offline. Hence, the internet allows for overcoming hierarchies, fuels self-actualization and creates togetherness, when it would be rather unlikely in real life. This is especially important for the mobilization of movements and contentious activities. According to Castells (2012),

[T]ogetherness is a fundamental psychological mechanism to overcome fear. And overcoming fear is the fundamental threshold for individuals to cross in order to engage in a social movement, since they are well aware that in the last resort, they will have to confront violence if they trespass the boundaries set up by the dominant elites to preserve their domination.

(Castells, 2012: 10)

Because of autonomy and anonymity, the internet and social media have the potential of empowering groups and individuals to engage in collective action, they usually would shy away from. Therefore, the internet should be seen as an important channel through which civil society can be organized and strengthened.

Contentious activities and internet activism have brought about alternative routes of engagement, which are apparently becoming increasingly well-frequented and allow for overcoming organizational barriers present in traditional manifestations of civil society. However, they have gone largely unnoticed in existing research, which therefore “(...) may disguise its [civil society’s] simultaneous transformation into alternative movements characterized by fuzzier boundaries and informal forms of support.” (Norris, 2002: 190) In other words, existing findings on the weakness of post-communist civil society may be exaggerated, because the narrow measurements based

on only a few and sometimes even just one traditional indicator miss out on these alternative and important activities (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003: 2).

A couple of qualifications have to be made with regards to the last statement. There are certainly authors who acknowledge the importance of both social movements and contentious activities for civil society. This is true for Uhlin (2006: 25), but at the same time his results are drawn from interviews with the civil society elite⁹. Simply coming across its members requires them to have some level of institutionalization, which social movements are usually lacking. Moreover, due to their engagement in at times violent or illegal contentious activities, masterminds of movements often hide in anonymity. The extent to which social movements are really included in Uhlin's study thus appears to be questionable, especially because the author tends to use the terms "CSO" and "NGO" interchangeably. Also, even though Hoskins and Mascherini (2009) focus on unconventional forms of participation, for example legal demonstrations, boycotts and petitions, less peaceful activities that are among the key characteristics of contentious activities are left out. Therefore, despite the fact that these studies are more comprehensive, they still carry the risk of giving an inaccurate picture of post-communist civil society. With regards to internet activism, scholars cannot necessarily be blamed for omitting it deliberately. In contrast, the research is outdated, because the internet has only been widely available for a few years. Yet, there has been a dramatic increase of internet connections in Eastern Europe since 2006 (Zalc, 2013), which points to the fact that ever more groups and people can enjoy the benefits of the internet that are conducive to the development of civil society, too. It can therefore be hypothesized that the current position of civil society in the post-communist region, especially with regards to contentious actions and internet activism, is less dramatic than previously assumed. However, in order to test this, a more encompassing conceptualization and operationalization of civil society is needed. More specifically, the dependent variable should be broadened to account for contentious activities and internet activism.

⁹ „Seventy-five per cent of respondents are heads/directors of their organizations (...). The other respondents also have influential positions within their organizations (...). Hence, the respondents constitute a civil society elite (...).” (Uhlin, 2006: 9)

4.2. A Revised Functional Operational Concept of Civil Society

In order to account for contentious activities and internet activism, first and foremost, a functional perspective on civil society should be adopted. In contrast to actor-oriented or organizational approaches, a functional viewpoint is less preoccupied with the precise definitions and specific forms of civil society that should be included in the theoretical construct (Uhlen, 2006: 25). By assuming that civil society fulfills certain functions, it focuses on the content and characteristics of collective action, what civil society is composed of, and, therefore, allows for a more widely applicable and contextually operational concept (Heinrich, 2005: 224). The basic idea is that

[W]e need to analyze actual processes of incorporation, exclusion, creation or legitimacy and loyalty, expression of interests and identities without worrying too much about whether this or that piece of society conceptually should be considered to belong to civil society or not. (Beckman & Sjögren, 2001: 4 in Uhlin, 2006: 25)

In the context of democratization, the functional perspective serves as the foundation for assessing how civil society fulfills its democratic functions.

This approach is advocated by CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the motives of which are among others (1) to design a globally relevant and applicable framework by understanding the civil society concept as a heuristic tool freed from its philosophical roots and any “Western bias”, (2) to balance contextual validity and cross-country comparability by giving only a core of universally applicable indicators that can be expanded by country-specific aspects, (3) to be as inclusive as possible and (4) to reflect the reality of civil society and not any ideal types bound by normative assumptions (Heinrich, 2004: 11-13). Following these aims, CIVICUS defines civil society as “(...) the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interests.” (Heinrich, 2004: 13) With “associate” and “common interest” the organization deliberately opted for using the simplest and most encompassing terms, which is why the definition becomes less specific with regards to the actors and activities of civil society (Heinrich, 2004: 15). This also sets it apart from Linz and Stepan’s (1996) definition, which, when referring to “(...) self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals (...)”, who “(...) attempt to

articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interest” (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 7), is still tied down to specific forms of action. At the same time, however, CIVICUS makes sure to preserve the notion of collective action, which is central to the idea of civil society. Uhlin (2006), for instance, argues that “[C]ivil society is a public sphere in which different kinds of actors – which have some degree of autonomy to the state and other social spheres – develop identities and articulate interests.” (Uhlin, 2006: 24) Even though Uhlin (2006: 25) refers to the aspect of collectivity in civil society in a later section, the definition itself does not really make this clear. In contrast, the quote could also refer to atomized individuals who represent their own selfish interests. CIVICUS balances the weaknesses of both approaches and, thus, seems most suitable.

The wide applicability and inclusive interpretation of the functional definition inevitably merges with a high degree of abstraction. In order not to lose oneself in conceptual fuzziness, it is all the more important to seek operational specificity. Therefore, CIVICUS has translated the theoretical concept into the Civil Society Index (CSI), which is a multi-level operational framework that construes civil society as four dimensions: the “structure” of civil society; the external “environment” in which it exists and functions; the “values” practiced and promoted in the civil society arena; and the “impact” of activities pursued by its actors. Each of these dimensions consists of several sub-dimensions and a total of 74 indicators (Heinrich, 2004: 17-18).

In a recent study, Bailer, Bodenstein and Heinrich (2013) present the results for the CSI dimensions “structure” and “culture” for 42 out of 49 countries that are covered by CIVICUS thus far. The authors show strong performances of certain post-communist countries that are not reported in previous research of civil society in the region. In general, civil society appears to be strongest in Western Europe, followed by Asia, post-communist Europe, Latin America and Africa (Bailer, Bodenstein & Heinrich, 2013: 294). Out of the 42 countries, the Czech Republic ranks fifth, Ukraine 12th, Bulgaria 15th, Poland 17th, Slovenia 18th and Romania 22nd. Russia is among the countries coming in last and occupies the 38th position (Bailer, Bodenstein & Heinrich, 2013: 303-304). Other post-communist countries, such as Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia as well as Hungary, are not covered by the CSI yet.

The strong intraregional variation among the post-Soviet countries suggests that there must be other factors determining the development of civil society than regional characteristics such as the “Soviet legacy” and the transition period. In fact, Bailer, Bodenstein and Heinrich (2013) show that the magnitude of the effect of the “Soviet legacy” is smaller than the standard deviation of the level of civil society within the post-communist region, which is why they reject the “legacy of socialism”-hypothesis and historical-attitudinal explanations. At the same time, this allows for a more positive outlook: the countries’ fates are not determined by their past and they can actually develop strong civil societies regardless of their history (Bailer, Bodenstein & Heinrich, 2013: 296). The authors also find that political quality is the most important independent variable determining the strength of civil society. “Our analysis reveals that well-functioning political institutions have a strong, positive effect on civil society.” (Bailer, Bodenstein & Heinrich, 2013: 302) Bailer, Bodenstein and Heinrich (2013) findings further underline the importance of a multi-dimensional, multi-level operational concept for the investigation of civil society. The encompassing measurements developed by CIVICUS yield more positive results on the state of civil society in the post-communist region than most previous research, which suggests that the latter has indeed missed out on something.

However, CSI methodology cannot claim victory on all fronts. Especially with regards to the concerns addressed in this paper, it is essential to take a closer look at the structural dimension, which is to assess the extent and basic characteristics of civil society and, thus, investigates the different forms of participation. The measurements are certainly more comprehensive than in most previous research. The structural dimension consists of 6 sub-dimensions and a total of 21 indicators. The CSI sub-dimensions “Breadth of Citizen Participation” and “Depth of Citizen Participation” both combine 8 indicators to provide information on the quantity structure of civil society on the individual level. Moreover, “Level of Organization”, “Inter-Relations”, “Resources” and “Diversity of Civil Society Participants” give insights into qualitative aspects by means of 13 indicators that are assessed on the organizational level (Heinrich, 2004). However, despite its vast scope, the structural dimension is not sufficiently equipped to fully accommodate contentious activities and internet activism. In the following, the sub-dimensions and indicators will be reviewed and modified accordingly.

Subsequently, an operational framework to assess contentious activities and online civil society will be presented.

Breadth of Citizen Participation

This first sub-dimension assesses the extent of citizen involvement and consists of five indicators focusing on the percentage of people that undertake non-partisan political action, donate to charity, belong to a CSO, undertake volunteer work and participate in collective community action (Heinrich, 2004: 35). In general, this battery of indicators seems to be very encompassing. However, a closer look at what non-partisan political action refers to, reveals that it does not suffice to properly investigate contentious activities in their entirety. In fact, the CSI only looks at a limited number of activities including whether people wrote a letter to a newspaper, signed a petition and attended a demonstration. In the case of writing to a newspaper, it may be questioned whether this actually serves to illustrate a political action. While open letters or public appeals to attract attention for a specific issue are certainly among the reasons why people contact newspapers, there are also other, mostly trivial motives, for example praising or criticizing certain articles. It thus appears that “writing a letter to a newspaper” is too blurry of an activity to really be subsumed under the heading of non-partisan political action and should be renamed to, for example, “writing public appeals” without referring to a specific medium as they may very well be published in an online community or blog, too.

Moreover, it is essential to increase the number of activities looked at, some of which are difficult to capture by the term “political action” in the first place. For example, contentious action also includes boycotts and strikes, which are not always directed against the state, but may also address the market or economic society respectively. Boycotts of certain products, for instance, can be undertaken as a protest against production processes. Strikes may be organized because of unsatisfactory working conditions. One should therefore refrain from investigating contentious actions on the basis of the motives underlying them, i.e. *political* action, and rather focus on the activities themselves. In order to avoid misunderstandings, the whole indicator should

therefore be renamed to “contentious activities” as opposed to “non-partisan political action”.

Moreover, one needs to ensure that attendance of a demonstration does not only refer to its legal aspects or peaceful rallies respectively, but also includes violent and illegal protest activities, such as riots. There may be limitations to measuring this on the basis of population surveys as is advocated by CIVICUS. Due to public perception issues or fear, people may shy away from admitting their participation in at times offensive or prosecutable protests. This could even be the case in anonymous surveys. In order to get more representative results, it is therefore advisable to combine public surveys with other sources of information, such as public records or media reviews, on the basis of which one could identify the frequency of protest activities, no matter whether illegal or legal, peaceful or violent, as well as the number of attendees. Detecting not only how often they take place but also how extensively people participate, this approach allows for insights into the breadth and depth of protest activities and, thus, strength of civil society.

Assessing the structure of internet activism in terms of both its quantity and quality structure also poses a problem. It seems that the advantages of the internet for civil engagement simultaneously serve to illustrate the biggest challenge for its assessment. On the one hand, communication online is characterized by a fast speed and large volume of information. The latter is increasing dramatically on a daily basis, and can be randomly changed or deleted. On the other hand, information and users are not bound to a specific location. Information transcends national borders and users are coming from all corners of the world. Therefore, it is very difficult to grasp internet activism in a specific place and at a certain time, which should be kept in mind when making any inferences about its structure. Apart from that, however, the CSI indicators do not make any reference to the internet and social media. In order to determine the magnitude of internet activism on the individual level, it is therefore essential to introduce at least one additional indicator which focuses on civil activities online that are not necessarily captured by contentious actions and conventional activities. This includes but is not limited to writing blogs, belonging to an online community or group and expressing one’s views in online discussions or voting on social and political issues via social media or in internet forums among others. Of course, this list of activities is

not exhaustive and needs to be updated as the internet and online applications are constantly developing and expanding.

Depth of Citizen Participation

In order to give a thorough picture of the quantity structure of civil society, it is not only important to look at the overall size of activities, but also how often and extensively they are undertaken. The CSI indicators focus on how much people donate to charity, how much volunteer work they do and how many different CSOs they belong to (Heinrich, 2004: 35-36). A couple of issues with regard to this selection of indicators can be identified. First, asking people about the amount of money they donate is a personal question, to which respondents might refuse to answer. Secondly, with regards to the last indicator, it appears that the objective of this sub-dimension is somehow missed. Organizational membership alone does not provide much information on the depth of participation. In fact, one can be a member of one or more CSOs without actively participating in them. Therefore, assessing the degree of commitment instead of the number of memberships seems more advisable.

Howard and Gilbert (2008) introduce a Civic Involvement Index, which overcomes both issues. According to them, a person is inactive if it shows no involvement of any kind; passive if it is only a member of or donated money to a CSO or both of them; active if it did volunteer work for or participated in activities of a CSO or any combination of either volunteer or participant with being member or donor; and super-active if a person has both volunteered and participated or done three or more of the above. The Civic Involvement Index combines all three aspects examined in the CSI while balancing their weaknesses and could thus replace them as a single indicator for the depth of conventional forms of participation.

With regards to contentious activities, a similar categorization should be introduced. Signing a petition seems to be more passive of an activity than actively boycotting certain products and striking or marching the streets in order to attract attention for a specific issue. Thus, the activities can be qualitatively differentiated. Based on the findings from the previous sub-dimension, one could thus make

conclusions about the actual depth of participation in terms of the activity level of people in contentious actions.

Additionally, an indicator measuring the depth of internet activism has to be introduced or merged with the former. Despite numerous examples for its enabling capacity for civil society, arguments are made that the internet will result in “slacktivism” or “clicktivism” respectively and weaken civil engagement and collective action (Christensen, 2011: 3; Putnam, 2000: 39). “Slacktivism” refers to “(...) activities that are easily performed, but they are considered more effective in making the participant feel good about themselves than to achieve that stated political goal.” (Morozov, 2009 in Christensen, 2011: 3) Online participation is argued to be relatively if not overly easy. For instance, instead of giving a real signature, users can assent to ideas and proposals by simply clicking a button, i.e. “clicktivism”. It is therefore essential to weigh the different activities in terms of the effort they require. Signing or “clicking” for a petition online as well as registering with an online community is certainly less demanding than formulating the petition, writing a blog or actively discussing issues in the forums of online communities. Based on this reasoning, it is possible to conclude on different levels of online activity and, thus, the actual depth or extent of online civil society.

Level of Organization

The “Level of Organization” focuses on the stability and maturity of the infrastructure of civil society and its capacity for collective action. Indicators assess the existence and effectiveness of CSO umbrella bodies, efforts to self-regulate, level of support infrastructure and international linkages (Heinrich, 2004: 36-37). However, instead of measuring the level of internal organization which reveals much about the quality of CSOs, most of the indicators are rather assessing the infrastructure surrounding civil society. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to put the existence and effectiveness of CSO umbrella bodies as well as the level of support infrastructure in the “environment”-dimension of the CSI.

In exchange, the content and form of civil society activities should be considered in more detail here. What are the issues that civil society actors are mainly interested in

and what strategies do they use to get their message across and reach their goals? According to Uhlin (2006), “(...) the important task for a researcher interested in democratization is not primarily to identify actors within civil society, but to identify politically relevant actors.” (Uhlin, 2006: 27-28) Thus, it should be investigated to what extent CSOs seek to fulfill their democratic functions and cover issues of political or social relevance. Moreover, the level of organization should also include an assessment of the activities undertaken by civil society actors in order to determine how confrontational they are, and to what extent they are present in the public eye.

Another important aspect that relates to online organized activities is their inter-linkage with other social media. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube among others serve to illustrate important platforms through which CSOs can reach out to people, keep communities alive and mobilize supporters to do something for the organization and, ultimately, increase the quality of their activities (Guo and Saxton, 2013: 14-15). Therefore, an additional indicator should be introduced that looks at the extent to which CSOs incorporate and use social media.

Inter-Relations

The sub-dimension “Inter-Relations” looks at the extent to which civil society actors communicate and cooperate with one another (Heinrich, 2004: 37). While this is an important aspect of the quality structure of civil society, it seems that another factor, namely the relationship to the other arenas of the democratic polity, is missing. The CSI covers this point in the “environment”-dimension. Nevertheless, then it is mainly addressed from the perspective of the political and economic society respectively and focuses on their attitudes to civil society and the opportunities and support they provide as well as how much they communicate with CSOs. However, this serves to illustrate only one side of the coin. In order to determine the quality structure of civil society, it is also essential to investigate how CSOs maintain relationships with the other arenas and through what channels and how often they communicate and cooperate with the political and economic society. This inevitably provides insights into the impact of civil society, too. Hence, another set of indicators focusing on the relationship to the other

arenas of the democratic polity should be added to complement the operational framework of civil society.

Resources

The CSI also looks at the adequacy of financial, human as well as technological and infrastructural resources for CSOs (Heinrich, 2004: 37-38). Internet activism presumes a certain level of technological and infrastructural resources. Thus, CSOs cannot work online if they do not have a computer and internet access at their disposal. While it is necessary to investigate this indicator for CSOs in general in order to determine as to whether they are even able to work online, it is thus less important for online CSOs.

With regard to the other indicators, “adequacy” seems to be a blurry term and needs further specification. As illustrated by Uhlin (2006: 68), many CSOs are unwilling to reveal their financial situation to researchers. One should therefore refrain from asking about exact amounts. Nevertheless, financial resources could be assessed on the basis of whether they suffice in order for CSOs to maintain themselves, for example by investigating whether there are weak spots in the organizational infrastructure caused by financial difficulties. Additionally, a closer look should be taken at the sources of funding, which are at times published in contrast to the budget CSOs have at their disposal. As argued in a previous section, sponsors may have an effect on the autonomy of CSOs, when the latter attempt to please them. Therefore, a broad portfolio of financial supporters would be of advantage.

An examination of human resources CSOs can draw on should follow the same categorization principles as outlined in the second sub-dimension focusing on the depth of participation. One should not only identify the number of members, but also their degree of commitment. With regards to online CSOs, this means that apart from the number of unique users and, thus, I.P.-addresses accessing the website (passive users), one should also differentiate between newsletter subscribers, those signing an online petition, or officially registering with a webpage (semi-active users), and users that formulate and upload petitions or write blog posts respectively (super-active). The activity level of users allows for conclusions on the quality of participation in online CSOs. Additionally, it is important to look at the number of employees or head

organizers respectively, because they give an idea of the capacities CSOs can rely on to organize their activities.

Diversity of Civil Society Participants

Indicators subsumed under “Diversity of Civil Society Participants” focus on the power relations within CSOs and look at the representation of women, rural dwellers, poor people and minorities in civil society leadership and membership, as well as the geographical representation of CSOs (Heinrich, 2004: 36). However, apart from power relations, the diversity of participants can also give insights into mobilization issues. This is especially true for the age and education of participants. As shown by Uhlin (2006: 65-67), civil society activists in Russia and the Baltic States are largely middle-aged and highly educated, which serves to illustrate that they encounter difficulties in mobilizing young people and work on a highly professional level rather detached from society. These are valuable insights into the organizational infrastructure of CSOs, which is why age and education should certainly be added to the basic characteristics looked at in this sub-dimension.

Earlier in this chapter, the hypothesis is made that existing findings on the weakness of civil society are exaggerated due to too limited measurements. Both contentious activities and internet activism have become important alternative channels of participation, but they are not sufficiently considered in existing studies. Based on the discussion, a number of indicators assessing the structure of contentious activities and internet activism can be identified and summarized in a framework that is illustrated in Table 1. Being equipped with an operational concept that allows for investigating the structural strength of contentious activities and internet activism, it is now possible to test this hypothesis. In the second part of this dissertation, the operational concept will be applied to Latvia, where the state of affairs of both contentious activities and internet activism militate in favor of a rather strong civil society. For now, however, existing research on civil society in Latvia will be presented, which transitions into the justification as to why Latvia is chosen as a case study.

Table 1: Empirical Indicators for Contentious Activities and Internet Activism

Quantitative aspects of contentious activities and internet activism	
Extent and depth of contentious activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - % of the population participating in contentious activities, such as boycotts, demonstrations, strikes and signing a petition - frequency of protest activities and number of attendees
Extent and depth of internet activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - % of population writing blogs, being member of an online community or group, voting or expressing their views on social and political issues
Qualitative aspects of online CSO	
Level of organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - online CSOs' topics - online CSOs' activities - online CSOs' inter-linkages with other social media and networks
Inter-relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - extent and depth of communication and cooperation between CSOs
Relationship to other arenas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - extent and depth of communication and cooperation with the political and economic society
Financial resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - extent and sources of funding
Human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - number of users and level of activity - number of employees
Diversity of activists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - basic characteristic of online CSOs' users, including gender, place of residence, income, age, education, nationality

5. CIVIL SOCIETY IN LATVIA

Recent accounts about the development of Latvian civil society are rare (Uhlen, 2010: 830). Among the few studies, “The Structure and Culture of Post-Communist Civil Society in Latvia” written by Anders Uhlin in 2010 serves to illustrate the most extensive and current one. The author investigates civil society in 2004 both on the individual and organizational level. His findings largely correspond with the general picture of a weak post-communist civil society.

On the individual level, Uhlin (2010) shows that only 19% of Latvians signed a petition, 12% attended lawful demonstrations and 8% joined in boycotts (Uhlen, 2010: 834). Significant predictors explaining participation in these unconventional activities include age, gender and education with young and highly educated people as well as men being more active. According to Uhlin (2010), participation is not predominantly taking place in Riga. In fact, residents of Riga showed less engagement than those living in the districts of Latgale and Zemgale.

With regards to associational membership, Uhlin’s (2010) findings demonstrate that only 6% of Latvians are active in a CSO. More than the majority of people maintained that they did not know about any CSO in their surroundings. Therefore, it seems that for most Latvians, CSOs do not have any significance at all (Uhlen, 2010: 835-836). According to Pabriks (2003: 141), in 2000 approximately 27% of Latvian citizens and 15% of non-citizens were involved in NGOs. There are certainly methodological differences with Uhlin (2010) asking for participation in any social and political organization respectively, while Pabriks (2003) focuses on involvement in specific NGOs, such as trade unions, religious and recreational organizations. Yet, the enormous differences between 2000 and 2004 indicate a trend towards decreasing levels of organizational membership in Latvia. This relates to Howard’s (2003: 71) findings, which show a drop in membership between 1990-91 and 1995-97 in all post-communist countries, except for Slovenia and Romania. Thus, it seems that Latvian civil society, when measured on the basis of organizational membership, has abated over several years.

Moreover, as illustrated by Pabriks (2003: 141), there seems to be a significant difference in terms of the levels of participation by Latvian citizens and non-citizens. This is also confirmed by Uhlin (2010), who argues that citizenship and status are very strong determinants of participation in formal organizations with Russian-speakers clearly being underrepresented. However, the author also finds that nationality is not a significant variable for explaining unconventional activities, which suggests that these forms of civil participation are less ethnically limited and exclusive in Latvia. The same can be said about gender, age and the financial situation of the respondent. In contrast to unconventional forms of participation, those active in CSOs were elderly and financially well positioned. People over 65 years of age, those belonging to rich households and women were overrepresented among members. According to Uhlin (2010), this shows an important distinction between informal and more formalized civil society activities (Uhlin, 2010: 838).

With regard to the organizational level, Uhlin (2010) argues that organized Latvian civil society is made up of small but professional NGOs with few members. One third of CSOs had less than 20 members, 34% between 21 and 100 members. Yet, 46% of all CSOs had at least one employee (Uhlin, 2010: 840). In terms of autonomy, 65% of respondents claimed their organization to be autonomous from the state, 17% maintained to be state-funded and 18% admitted to be politically dependent on the state (Uhlin, 2010: 841-842).

The typical activities of CSOs include interest articulation, information gathering and public education. Even though carried out less often, networking with similar organizations, fund-seeking, mobilization of new members and transnational networking also turned out to be important. However, political activities, such as writing petitions, lobbying political decision makers and checking state power, were much less common among CSOs. Confrontational activities, including demonstrations, boycotts and strikes, were almost non-existent. Similar to the other Baltic States and Russia, Uhlin (2010) concludes that Latvian CSOs are largely non-political and not at all confrontational (Uhlin, 2010: 842). Based on this argumentation, the author questions whether Latvian civil society can fulfill its strengthening role for democracy (Uhlin, 2010: 844).

In terms of cultural aspects, Uhlin (2010) shows that civil society activists did not hold more democratic values than non-activists, yet they had much more trust in people and tended to be more tolerant. However, according to the Latvian Human Development Report 2008/2009, interpersonal trust indicators for the whole population are far below those typical for other (Nordic) democracies. Quoting Eurobarometer data from 2008, the report also shows that trust in government, the Parliament and political parties is four times lower in Latvia than the European average (Rozenvalds & Ijabs, 2009: 31). The report also points out that alienation from the state tends to be greater in Latvia than in most European countries. Belief in one's ability to influence politics is lower among people in Latvia than in Russia, Poland, Hungary and Croatia. Despite this attitude, Latvians argue that there is a greater need for government support in all areas of life (Rozenvalds & Ijabs, 2009: 31). This corresponds with Uhlin's (2010: 847) argument that an elitist perspective on liberal democracy with low support for political participation and a tendency to emphasize strong man-rule prevails in Latvia. Referring to Almond and Verba (1965), the Latvian Human Development Report concludes that Latvian political culture can be described as consisting predominantly of parochial and subject types with a lack of participatory political culture. Latvians are described as expecting "(...) a lot, even too much, from the state; but their own readiness to devote time to public welfare is relatively wanting." (Rozenvalds & Ijabs, 2009: 31)

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that Latvian civil society is fairly weak, at least until 2004. However, the results fail to account for the whole repertoire of actions subsumed under contentious activities and do not refer to internet activism at all. Nevertheless, according to the Latvian Human Development Report of 2008/2009, contentious forms of participation are increasingly used since 2003/2004. At the same time, the report acknowledges that ICTs are becoming ever more important for the mobilization of Latvian civil society (Rozenvalds & Ijabs, 2009: 28). In fact, the rise of contentious activities and internet activism has been recognized far beyond the country's borders. Among others, Latvia hits international headlines with "Protests Rock Latvia", "Protests Turn Violent in Latvia", "Anti-Government Rioting Hits Riga", "More Than 100 Arrested during Demonstrations in Riga", and "Online, Latvians' Ideas

Can Bloom into Law”¹⁰. Mass protests are even referred to as revolutions, and a number of innovative online CSOs, such as ManaBalss.lv, claim to have a membership as large as 15% of the population (Rozenvalds & Ijabs, 2009: 29; ManaBalss, 2013a).

Public participation in form of contentious activities and internet activism is recognized by think tanks and news agencies alike and certainly make Latvia stand out. Therefore, the academic debate on an alleged weakness of Latvian civil society seems to be puzzling and outdated. Can Latvian civil society still be argued as weak since the mid-2000s? There is an urgent need for providing information on the state of affairs of Latvian civil society that is more up to date and encompassing. Based on the revised operational concept outlined in the previous section, both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the structure of Latvian civil society in terms of contentious activities and internet activism will be investigated in the following chapters. To research questions will guide this analysis:

- (1) What is the magnitude and, thus, extent and depth of public participation in contentious activities and internet activism in Latvia?
- (2) What is the organizational infrastructure of Latvian online CSOs composed of?

The former research question is assessed on the basis of an extensive secondary data and literature review and covered in the next chapter. The latter is examined through expert interviews with former or current employees and volunteers working for the online organizations ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv. Details on sample and data collection precede the actual analysis, which is located in chapter seven, “The Quality Structure of Latvian Civil Society: Organizational Infrastructure of Online CSOs”.

¹⁰ Headlines refer to the following articles:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markmardell/2009/02/riga_latvia_since_dawn_the.html;
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/world/europe/14iht-latvia.4.19364643.html?_r=3&_
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7827708.stm>; <http://www.welt.de/politik/article3020923/Ueber-100-Festnahmen-nach-Demonstration-in-Riga.html>; http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/world/europe/a-web-site-where-latvians-ideas-can-become-law.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

6. THE QUANTITY STRUCTURE OF LATVIAN CIVIL SOCIETY: CONTENTIOUS ACTIVITIES AND INTERNET ACTIVISM

The magnitude and, thus, extent and depth of public participation in contentious activities and internet activism are investigated on the basis of the operational framework outlined earlier in this paper. Hence contentious actions are assessed by focusing on the share of the population signing petitions and participating in boycotts, demonstrations and strikes, as well as the frequency of protest activities and the number of attendees. The quantity structure of internet activism in turn is detected by investigating the percentage of the population writing blogs, being a member of an online community or group, and voting or expressing views on social and political issues via social media and networks. The information on the indicators is provided by an extensive secondary data and literature review.

6.1. Contentious Activities

Unfortunately, there is no data available, which covers the full range of contentious activities in Latvia, i.e. unconventional *and* less peaceful forms of action. For Latvia, the latest available data is from 2008 and provided by the European Social Survey. However, it only covers unconventional forms of participation. Respondents were asked the following:

“There are different ways of trying to improve things in Latvia or help things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you (1) signed a petition, (2) boycotted certain products, (3) taken part in a lawful demonstration?”

The results are listed in Table 2. In order to give a comparable perspective, Estonia and Russia, which Uhlin (2006) also focuses on, and the European average are included in the table, too. For Lithuania, data on these indicators is missing.

Table 2. Unconventional Activities in 2008

Participation (in % of population)	Latvia	Estonia	Russia	European Average
Petition	5.6	8.0	5.6	18.0
Boycott	5.2	5.6	4.1	12.7
Lawful demonstrations	6.9	2.1	5.3	5.8

Source: ESS Round 4: European Social Survey Round 4 Data (2008).

According to European Social Survey data of 2008, Latvia scores comparatively low on signing a petition and boycotting certain products, which are among the less disruptive forms of contentious actions. This is especially true when compared to the European average. Only 5.6% of Latvian citizens signed a petition in the past 12 months, while on average 18.0% of Europeans did so. Moreover, 12.7% of Europeans boycotted a product and only 5.2% of Latvians engaged in this activity. In this regard, Latvia performs very similar to Estonia and Russia, albeit relatively more Estonians signed a petition when compared to the other two countries.

However, the results are more salient with regards to participation in lawful demonstrations. According to the data, 6.9% of Latvians participated in a demonstration during the last 12 months, which is about 1% to 1.5% more than the European average and in Russia and nearly 5% more than in Estonia. Thus, Latvians seem to prefer more confrontational forms of participation that also require more efforts and a higher level of activity. This is somewhat in contrast to Uhlin's (2010) findings, where signing a petition was the most common unconventional activity Latvians engaged in.

Currently, there is no survey data available that covers more disruptive aspects of contentious activities, such as illegal and violent demonstrations, riots and strikes. Nevertheless, Kalacinska (2010) published a study which examines the coverage of protest actions¹¹ in Latvia's daily newspaper "Diena" from 2006 to 2009. This method also corresponds to the revised operational concept and selection of indicators outlined earlier and is therefore a valuable addition to the assessment of contentious action in Latvia. Kalacinska (2010) selected "Diena" on the basis of its large readership and high

¹¹ The term "protest actions" used by Kalacinska (2010) refers to the full range of contentious activities.

professional standards (Kalacinska, 2010: 17). Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the newspaper has been owned by a number of third parties since 1993, which might have affected its impartiality. In 2009, for instance, it was sold to an undisclosed foreign owner, which resulted in the resignation of many of its leading journalists and editors (Freedom House, 2012). Moreover, the Latvian media landscape is divided on the basis of the two main nations residing in it, i.e. the Latvian and Russian language (Muiznieks, 2010: 249). Hence, the Latvian newspaper “Diena” may only provide one perspective, excluding events that are important to the Russian community but less interesting to the Latvian-speaking population. Selection bias might be further reinforced as media tend to focus on sensationalist events, which guarantee them a large readership while excluding those that are less visible, yet not necessarily less important. Furthermore, space is limited and not all articles get published (Kalacinska, 2010: 17-18). These limitations of the study should be kept in mind.

According to Kalacinska (2010), a total of 116 protest actions can be detected in Latvian news between 2006 and 2009 (Kalacinska, 2010: 25). Her findings show that contentious activities are increasing since 2006 and, thus, revealing a positive trend from 21 incidents in 2006 to 36 in 2009. According to news reports therefore, there are about two to three protest activities per month. The number of large protest activities attracting over 500 people is steadily increasing (Kalacinska, 2010: 55). Of them, 5% were violent, 71% non-violent and 24% without any significant disruption, such as open letters and public appeals. It can thus be concluded that more violent forms of contentious activities comprise only a minor part of civil society in Latvia, while non-violent forms of participation, such as demonstrations, marches, rallies and strikes, are more common (Kalacinska, 2010: 28). However, it needs to be mentioned that Kalacinska (2010) does not differentiate between legal and illegal activities, which is why one cannot really argue that unconventional forms are dominating. Kalacinska (2010) argues that protest actions are largely politically motivated, because their most important targets were state institutions, notably the government, parliament and particular ministries (Kalacinska, 2010: 34).

Kalacinska’s (2010) findings on the growing number of extensive contentious activities that are largely political, suggest that ever more Latvians are actively demonstrating to make themselves heard. The rising number of protest actions raises the

question as to what has caused these developments. According to Kalacinska (2010: 31), disruptive forms of political engagement are increasing dramatically in Latvia since 2007, because of the general frustrations with the political system that merged with social and economic insecurities caused by the economic crisis in 2008.

The former was initiated by a decline of legitimacy of the government due to the following incidents: (1) in the spring of 2007, the Latvian Parliament Saeima attempted to modify security legislation that would make it easier for the state to access private data; (2) in July 2007, politically inexperienced Valdis Zatlers was elected to the office of the President of Latvia, the candidacy of who was said to have been agreed upon beforehand; (3) in August 2007, a book was published that is discrediting Latvia's judiciary; and (4) in October 2007, then Prime Minister Aigars Kalvītis attempted to dismiss the chair of Latvia's Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB), Aleksejs Loskutovs, under whose command KNAB had disclosed numerous scandals. In November 2007, societal frustration and dissatisfaction with the government cumulated in what later had been termed the "Umbrella Revolution", because it rained incessantly that autumn. Opposition parties and various CSOs organized a rally in Riga with the manifestation "For Rule of Law, for Honest Politics", which was attended by more than 10.000 individuals (Rozenvalds & Ijabs, 2009: 28; Kalacinska, 2010: 21-22). According to Kalacinska (2010: 23), this was the largest protest since the beginning of the 1990s and, therefore, serves to illustrate an "awakening" of Latvian civil society, marking a new turn in political participation culture. And, indeed, in a country with only about two million inhabitants, more than 10.000 participants in a rally is an impressive number (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2013c). The "Umbrella Revolution" had far-reaching consequences. It resulted in the resignation of then Prime Minister Kalvītis in December 2007 and KNAB's chair Loskutovs stayed in office until June the following year (Rozenvalds & Iljabs, 2009: 29).

Another significant wave of protests hit Latvia as a response to the economic difficulties caused by the financial crisis in 2008. Mounting unemployment and strict austerity measures further fueled discontent with the government and the Parliament and, ultimately, led to the "Penguin Revolution", during which the President was called on to request early elections and dissolve the Parliament. The events were called "Penguin Revolution" due to a statement by Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis, who

apparently urged people to huddle together like penguins to stay warm. A demonstration organized by opposition parties and various NGOs was attended again by more than 10.000 participants and turned into a violent riot, during which police officers, Parliament buildings and other public institutions as well as shops were attacked. In the end, 50 people were injured and 106 arrested (Rozenvalds & Iljabs, 2009: 29, Kalacinska, 2010: 23). The fact that the events have been depicted as revolutions in the media, points to their significance both in terms of the extent of civil engagement and the consequences for political decision-making.

While this is only a selection of the major contentious activities taking place in Latvia since 2007, numerous other, smaller actions can be identified. Among the more recent ones is the “Oligarch Funeral” of 2011, which was attended by nearly 8.000 people to “(...) denounce political corruption and the perceived power in the hands of Latvia’s supposed oligarchs.” (Freedom House, 2012) This event also marks the founding date of ManaBalss.lv, one of the most recent examples for civil participation online.

The findings presented in this section are in contrast to previous studies on Latvian civil society. While signing a petition and boycotting a certain product are indeed not that widespread at least when compared to the European average, Estonia and Russia in 2008, it appears that Latvians have nevertheless developed a protest culture that expresses itself in more confrontational means of action, such as demonstrations, rallies, marches, strikes and even riots. The high level of commitment, which these activities demand, simultaneously means that participants are rather active. According to Kalacinska (2010), protest actions and especially those with many attendants were increasing between 2006 and 2009, which indicates a positive trend for later years, too. Based on these numbers, one could thus argue that the extent and depth of contentious activities at least in terms of protest actions is well-developed. Moreover, participation is largely politically motivated and prevailing during times of political legitimacy crises, on which protests have a strong bearing. This gives grounds to argue that civil society meets its democratic functions. Thus, Uhlin’s (2010) findings on the weakness of less formalized civil activities cannot be confirmed.

6.2. Internet Activism

Internet activism is a relatively new phenomenon in Latvia, which is mainly due to the fact that internet access has only been available for a few years. As of 2004, only 14.7% of Latvian households had an internet connection. Since then, this number has steadily grown with 68.7% of households being equipped with access to the internet in 2012 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2013a). Hence, there are ever more Latvians, who theoretically can enjoy the opportunities and advantages provided by the internet and participate in the online public sphere. To what extent are they using the internet as a platform for civil society activities?

The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2013b) collects data on the purposes of internet usage on a yearly basis. Indicators of interest in the context of internet activism are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Purposes of Internet Usage in 2012

Purposes of internet usage	% of total population	% of internet users
Creating websites or blogs	5.9	8.1
Posting messages to chat sites, blogs, newsgroups or online discussion forums, instant messaging	37.3	51.0
Participation in social networks*	55.1	79.0
Interaction with public authorities	47.3	63.7
Obtaining information from public authorities' websites	45.7	61.6
Reading and posting opinions on civic or political issues via websites*	27.1	38.9
Taking part in online consultations or voting to define civic or political issues*	12.0	17.3

* Data was not available for 2012 and is thus taken from the 2011 survey.

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2013b).

The data indicates that the majority of Latvians is participating in social networks and, thus, a member of an online community of some sort. This suggests that Latvians may have found alternative platforms and communities online to get their opinions and ideas across as opposed to membership in more traditional, formal organizations offline. Approximately 6% of the population creates blogs or websites, while nearly 40% participate in online discussions through instant messaging and posting messages to chat sites, blogs, news groups or online discussion forums. Nevertheless, most Latvians prefer to comment on or post messages to already existing sites, instead of creating a blog or website themselves.

How relevant are these online activities for Latvian civil society? Another set of indicators reveals that almost half of the Latvian population goes online to get informed about and interact with the political society. It thus appears that the internet is a well-frequented bridge between the public and political society. In 2011, additional survey items asked people whether their online involvement is related to civil activities. Nearly 30% of Latvians claimed that they read and post opinions on civic and political issues on websites. Moreover, 12% of the population indicated that they use the internet in order to directly influence decision-making, for example by participating in online consultations or voting on civic or political issues.

More recent data of 2012 is available in a Flash Eurobarometer report, which puts Latvia among eight out of 27 EU member states, where respondents argue that expressing views on the internet and social media is the main route to directly influence decision-making. 27% of Latvian respondents claim to have done so during the past 24 months¹². Especially with regards to organizational membership, the weakness of which was confirmed in the survey¹³, this serves to illustrate that internet activism is quite strong and, thus, an important aspect of civil society in the country (TNS Political & Social, 2013: 30). It is essential to mention, though, that the survey mainly focuses on conventional forms of participation and does not include any questions on contentious

¹² Latvians, thus, are more active in terms of expressing their views on the internet and social media than Estonians. Only 22% of Estonian respondents claim to do so. This finding is striking considering the fact that Estonia is often assumed to be at the forefront of e-governance and online services (TNS Political & Social, 2013: 30).

¹³ 74% of Latvians as opposed to 56% EU average claim that they are no member of any NGO or association, which puts Latvia among the eight lowest scoring countries in terms of organizational membership. However, even more Lithuanians (84%) and Estonians (81%) refrain from any associational memberships (TNS Political & Social, 2013: 30).

activities, which is why the relative importance of internet activism vis-à-vis offline contentious activities cannot be determined. Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that in terms of the extent of participation, online civil activism occupies a strong position, even in a European-wide comparative perspective.

With regards to the depth of internet activism, inferences are difficult to make. The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2013b) does not make any distinctions between reading and posting opinions as well as online consultation and voting, which would be important for assessing the depth of commitment especially in the light of “slacktivism” or “clicktivism”. The same is true for the Flash Eurobarometer, where survey items ask participants only about “expressing views on the internet and social media”. This covers a broad range of activities from commenting to voting on certain political or social issues. The only lead given here is the fact that there are fewer Latvians creating a blog or website than those commenting on or posting on already existing ones (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2013b). Because the former requires certainly more effort, it is possible to argue that most internet users are not the super-active type of participant.

Just as contentious activities, the extent of internet activism challenges existing findings on the weakness of civil society. Especially in contrast to traditional channels of participation, the internet attracts many Latvians to voice their opinion and participate in civil and political activities. This is true even in a European-wide comparison. The number of participants in and political relevance of both contentious activities and internet activism are outstanding, which gives grounds to conclude that the quantity structure of Latvian civil society is indeed stronger than previously assumed. While participants of contentious activities are rather active and prefer confrontational but peaceful actions, data on internet activism indicates that users are semi-active. However, more precise insights into the depth of participation of internet activists cannot be made yet. An investigation of the quality structure of civil society and, thus, organizational infrastructure of online CSOs will provide more information on the activity levels of users.

7. THE QUALITY STRUCTURE OF LATVIAN CIVIL SOCIETY: ORGANIZATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF ONLINE CSOs

The previous chapter revealed that internet activism and contentious activities have become well-frequented and widely used alternative routes for public participation. However, in order to give a more thorough account of the structural strength of civil society, it is also necessary to look at the general condition and, thus, quality of these routes, i.e. what they are composed of. In this chapter, the organizational infrastructure of Latvian online CSOs is to be examined carefully. Because the purpose is to give a detailed account of the practices, opportunities and challenges online CSOs engage in and encounter rather than measuring their magnitude, it immediately suggest itself to do an in-depth, qualitative analysis. Therefore, the indicators for investigating the quality structure of online CSOs will be applied to two case studies: ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv.

7.1. The Sample

The first CSO, ManaBalss.lv, translates from Latvian as “My Voice”. It is a free of charge social initiative platform, where Latvians can submit their ideas to become petitions and vote on the proposals of others. Launched in June 2011, it attracted a lot of attention over the past two years and hit international headlines. Referring to ManaBalss.lv, The New York Times featured an article called “Online, Latvians’ Ideas Can Bloom into Law”, the Swiss Radio and Television SFR praises “Progressive Latvia: People Initiative via Internet” and the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle argues “Web Tool Bolsters Latvians’ Political Participation”¹⁴. ManaBalss.lv was covered in the German-French TV channel ARTE, the American

¹⁴ The articles the headlines refer to can be retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/world/europe/a-web-site-where-latvians-ideas-can-become-law.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> (The New York Times), <http://www.srf.ch/kultur/im-fokus/weblese/fortschrittliches-lettland-volksinitiative-per-internet> (SFR), and <http://www.dw.de/web-tool-bolsters-latvians-political-participation/a-15343035> (Deutsche Welle)

Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and numerous other news sites and blogs¹⁵. The CSO claims that 15% of the Latvian population is using its platform and two new laws have been passed due to its efforts. Because the media generally agrees that ManaBalss.lv is an open government success story that manages to attract an enormous amount of users, the CSO was chosen as a first case study for examining qualitative aspects of internet activism.

Politika.lv, which translates as “Politics”, was founded in 2001 by the Soros Foundation-Latvia and is arguably the oldest online CSO in Latvia. During its 12 years of existence, Politika.lv has gained a lot of experience, developed and changed its organizational infrastructure. It started as an information resource center providing papers and opinion articles on public policy issues. However, over the years it has introduced numerous applications and extensions to increase the dialogue among civil society activists and between society and the state as well as to enhance public participation in the decision-making process. Politika.lv has been widely quoted in mainstream and social media and was also referenced in decisions of Latvia’s Constitutional Court (PROVIDUS, 2013a). At the Global e-Democracy Forum in Paris in 2003, Politika.lv gained international recognition and was awarded for being “(...) an excellent example of a one-stop policy shop in a small country where quality online political resources are not widely available.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2003) As of 2002, it is part of the public policy think tank PROVIDUS. Due to its maturity, Politika.lv serves to illustrate one of the richest sources of data and information on online CSOs’ organizational infrastructure. It is therefore an excellent case for an in-depth investigation of qualitative aspects of the structure of online civil society.

7.2. Data Collection

Data and information on the different indicators were collected through a series of expert interviews either in person, via the voice-over-IP software Skype or over email as well as media reviews. In the case of ManaBalss.lv, the founders and contemporary

¹⁵ The publications of ARTE and PBS on ManaBalss.lv can be retrieved from <http://www.arte.tv/sites/de/yourope-de/2013/05/17/9043/> and <http://www.pbs.org/idealab/2011/08/manabalsslv-gives-latvians-a-voice-in-legislation200>

owners of the website, Kristofs Blaus and Jānis Ertis, were contacted via email. Kristofs Blaus also referred the author of this paper to Ieva Kudure, who is currently working for ManaBalss.lv as a volunteer. It was not possible to arrange interviews in person or through Skype. Thus, conversations were made via email only. Additional information was collected through media reviews, which is why newspaper articles are cited in the analysis.

Politika.lv's organizational infrastructure is investigated on the basis of expert interviews with current and former employees. The author met and interviewed Marta Herca, Politika.lv's web developer, and Linda Curika, researcher at PROVIDUS, in Riga. Via Skype, interviews were conducted with Nellijs Ločmele, Politika's first editor-in-chief from 2001 to 2006, Krista Baumane, member of Politika.lv's first editorial board and former longstanding employee of PROVIDUS, Iveta Kažoka, researcher at PROVIDUS, as well as Rita Ruduša, Politika.lv's editor-in-chief from 2006 to 2008. Moreover, the author kept close contact with Ilze Straustiņa, currently Politika.lv's producer, and received information and data from her via email. At times, interviews were followed by written conversations and follow-up questions via email.

All information and data were collected between April 2013 and September 2013.

7.3. Limitations of Study

There are limitations to this study, which should be mentioned before turning to the analysis. First of all, the sample consists of two cases only, which might seem to be rather small. However, as already mentioned the goal is to give an in-depth picture of the unique organizational infrastructure CSOs are relying on when situated online. The objective is not to show how many online CSOs exist in Latvia, but how well they can actually work. Two case studies were deemed sufficient as examples providing information on opportunities and difficulties and, thus, the quality of organized internet activism. It should be kept in mind, though, that these examples cannot be representative for all online CSOs and, thus, the entire organizational infrastructure civil society is based on online.

Secondly, diverse methods of gathering data were applied, which all entail different advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it is certainly easier to interpret facial expressions, gestures or changing pitches in personal interviews than over Skype and especially email. A one-to-one conversation helps building trust among dialogue partners and, thus, receiving more sensitive data. On the other hand, it is easier to grasp numbers and data, when they are written down. Moreover, when confronted with questions over email, respondents have more time to reflect on them, which might in turn be beneficial for the completeness of contents. While this should be kept in mind when reading the analysis, it has to be mentioned that both Skype and email interviews are not deemed to be problematic here, because the indicators applied do not focus on too sensitive and personal information.

Thirdly, all interviews were conducted in English. Both the author and all of the respondents are no native speakers. Hence, certain language barriers are inevitable. Nevertheless, no grave communication and understanding difficulties were apparent during the interviews. Statements made by respondents are recited word for word and, if present, not rectified for grammar or spelling mistakes. Additionally, some statements that were taken from Latvian newspaper articles were translated into English and cited in the analysis. Because Latvian is not the mother tongue of the author either, limitations might arise from this as well.

Finally, interviews are fairly subjective sources of information; they always reflect personal opinions and attitudes. More objective information is gathered on the basis of newspaper articles, which is included in the case study of ManaBalss.lv. Nevertheless, they are subject to selection bias. Again, subjectivity and selection bias serve to illustrate limitations of the present study that have to be considered.

7.4. Data Analysis

ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv are assessed on the basis of the operational framework outlined in a previous chapter. Hence, the organizational infrastructure is investigated by looking at the CSOs' level of organization, their inter-relations with other CSOs, the relationship to other arenas of the democratic polity, including the political and

economic society, their financial and human resources as well as the diversity of their participants and users respectively.

7.4.1. ManaBalss.lv

ManaBalss.lv is an online petition platform, where any Latvian citizen 16 years of age or above can submit initiatives after authorizing with his or her bank details¹⁶. Thus, ManaBalss.lv makes sure that all of its members are indeed legal persons and do not create fake profiles or identities. Submitted initiatives are checked by a group of voluntary experts, who also give feedback on possible improvements or changes. Subsequently, a link to the initiative is created, which can be shared, for instance via social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, and needs to gather 100 signatures to confirm that the issue matters to other people, too. Afterwards, lawyers check the proposal to confirm that it is legally sound, not unconstitutional and serves to illustrate an actual solution to the problem it addresses. Once confirmed, the initiative is uploaded to ManaBalss.lv and up for vote. A parliamentary rule passed in 2012 dictates that the Latvian Parliament has to take up any petition that gets more than 10.000 votes (Mangule, 2013).

According to co-founder Kristofs Blaus, the motivation underlying ManaBalss.lv's foundation was the observation that "[I]n Latvia there was a lack of citizen involvement, especially because of the lack of results and the absence of a bridge to connect them to the political elite." (Martinez, 2011) The purpose of ManaBalss.lv is to build this bridge, "(...) to let every individual and every organization get heard, gather like-minded, show the public need to authorities and get their ideas done!" (Blaus, 2011) The second co-founder, Jānis Ertis, adds that

[W]e want to make people not just going in front of the government building and ask for a better future but to help them to articulate their requests and to be certain what they are asking to be changed or

¹⁶ There are shortcuts on the website that are directly linked to the online interfaces of Latvian banks. Here, users can log in using the same transaction codes that they are usually using for internet banking. This allows for checking the users' identities against the bank records, mainly that they are above 16 years of age and possess the Latvian citizenship.

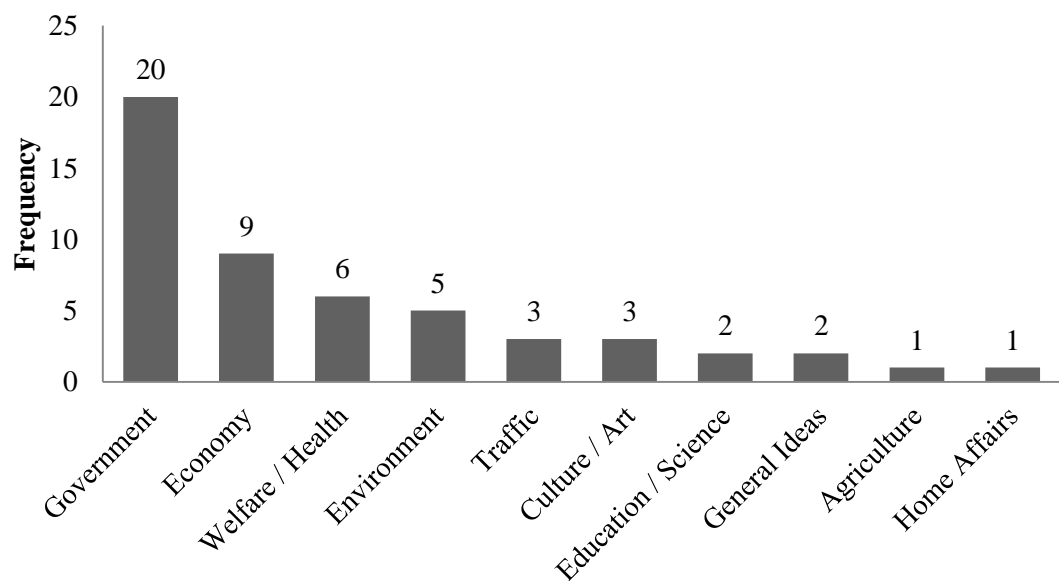
improved. With ManaBalss everybody can submit initiatives and improve, change their country for the better. (Kuzevski, 2012)

How does the organizational infrastructure, that ManaBalss.lv relies on to meet its objectives, look like?

Level of Organization

In total, about 500 initiatives have already been submitted to ManaBalss.lv (Blaus, 2013). However, only a tenth of them met the criteria necessary for being uploaded to the website, which is why 52 of them are currently up for vote. Each of these initiatives is categorized according to the topic it covers. Figure 1 summarizes the frequency of each label.

Figure 1. Topics of ManaBalss.lv's Petitions



Source: ManaBalss (2013b).

The figure reveals that there is a broad range of topics dealt with on the website. Most of them address explicitly political or economic issues, for instance governmental legitimacy or taxes. Proposals refer to matters of MP compensation, the parliamentary budget or MP perjury. Activists also demand the reduction of taxes, for instance on electricity, gas, heating and food.

As of August 09, 2013, the most prominent initiatives among the 52 that made it to the website demanded (1) to reduce compensations for MPs if the Parliament is dismissed, (2) to reduce VAT on food, (3) to keep the Lats as the Latvian currency, (4) to tighten penalties on MP perjury, (5) to increase the tolerance rate of speed cameras to 15 km/h, (6) to introduce online elections, (7) to make Parliament consider any petition that gathers 10.000 signatures and, thus, legalize the work of ManaBalss.lv, (8) to stop the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), and (9) to disclose the identities of Latvian offshore business owners (ManaBalss, 2013b). The large number of politically relevant topics suggests that ManaBalss.lv fulfills democratic functions of CSOs.

Because ManaBalss.lv's self-ascribed duty is to initiate, advertise, lobby for and put through relevant petitions in order to change existing laws, activities are rather elite-challenging and confrontational. Moreover, ManaBalss.lv organized the "Oligarch Funeral" in June 2011, a demonstration against corruption and oligarch governance respectively, which marked the launch date of the platform.

I started thinking of the launch of the platform really in January 2011. In April we formed a group (I, Viesturs Dule + other celebrities, media, different field experts) to think of how to launch. We waited for the correct moment. And it came – we organized the Oligarch Funeral. (J. Erts, personal communication, April 08, 2013)

Apart from that, less confrontational activities are also important. A great deal of resources is invested in the consultation process, which supports activists to successfully formulate and improve their proposals. At the same time, successful initiatives are equipped with additional information that enlighten others about the issue at stake and, thus, reflect public education efforts. ManaBalss.lv's transnational networking is also shown by the fact that "Barack Obama, Brussels etc. have been talking about our platform and making it as an example." (J. Erts, personal communication, April 08, 2013) ManaBalss.lv participated or was mentioned in "Warming Up for the Citizens' Initiative" in Brussels on January 26, 2012, and the "Open Government Partnership Event" in Washington on September 21, 2011 respectively¹⁷. They have also participated in national events such as the Debate and

¹⁷ Contributions relating to ManaBalss.lv can be retrieved from http://webcast.ec.europa.eu/eutv/portal/_v_wm_56_en/player/od_pres/tiles_player_tab_box_list_agendas.

Media Workshop in Riga¹⁸. Moreover, the CSO devotes time to fund-seeking, which is, for example, reflected in calls for donations published on the website (ManaBalss, 2013a).

In order to stay in the public eye and attract attention for its cause, ManaBalss.lv is connected to a couple of social networks. It has published a video on YouTube¹⁹ explaining how the platform works and also owns a Twitter account²⁰, which is used to raise awareness for current activities. Moreover, there are shortcuts to social networks and social media under each initiative for everyone to easily share the link on Facebook, Twitter or Draugiem.lv, a Latvian social network similar to Facebook, and, thus, mobilize new signatures.

It can thus be concluded that ManaBalss.lv employs the whole repertoire of activities CSOs can draw on, from unobtrusive actions, such as information gathering, public education, lobbying, networking and resource mobilization, to more confrontational activities, such as petitions and demonstrations. Mobilization efforts are reflected by the cross-linkages to other social media. The content of ManaBalss.lv is largely politically relevant.

Inter-Relations

When asked about the communication and cooperation with other CSOs, Ieva Kudure responded that

[A]t the beginning some other NGOs helped to popularize the idea of ManaBalss and some lawyers from those NGOs help to work with initiatives (Organization PROVIDUS, organization “Delna” (Transparency International in Latvia)). (I. Kudure, personal communications, August 2, 2013)

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/09/20/president-obama-open-government-partnership-event> (Washington)

¹⁸ Information on ManaBalss.lv’s participation can be retrieved from <http://idebate.org/news-articles/co-founder-manabalsslv-first-guest-speaker-debate-and-media-workshop-latvia>

¹⁹ The video can be retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JF8POPPf0P0>

²⁰ ManaBalss.lv’s Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/ManaBalss>

Currently, no cooperation or communication with other civil society actors or organizations is known, which indicates that inter-relations have gone rather dormant.

Relationship with Other Arenas

Both communication and cooperation with the political arena are well-developed. Already before ManaBalss.lv's launch, co-founder Jānis Erts consulted with politicians to design the platform in a way that it has the largest possible impact.

So the first thing that I wanted to do, is to ease the process, how people ideas could get heard. Because the system before was just too hard. (...) For 9 months I went to different people (journalists, MPs, ordinary people etc.) to have different opinions and understand how the solution should exactly look like. (J. Erts, personal communication, April 08, 2013)

Moreover, "[T]hree days after its launch, Valdis Zatlers, Latvia's outgoing president, made a public appeal to use ManaBalss.lv." (Blaus, 2011) Additionally, Parliament speaker Solvita Aboltina quoted by *The New York Times* argued that "[I]t was a time when the lack of trust in both the government and Parliament reached its peak; therefore, launching of this social platform was a logical initiative." (McGrane, 2013) Thus, it appears that the communication with the political arena, apart from being present, is also characterized by a friendly, supportive dialogue.

The fact that the Parliament modified existing laws in 2011 to legitimize the work of ManaBalss.lv is certainly the biggest proof for the in-depth relationship between the CSO and the political arena²¹. "It's because of ManaBalss that the Latvian parliament changed the law and allowed the submission of collective applications (initiatives)." (I. Kudure, personal communications, August 2, 2013) Because of ManaBalss.lv's efforts, the number of signatures needed for a petition to be considered by the Parliament was reduced from 90.000 to 10.000. Simultaneously, developing and voting for initiatives through the internet was accepted as an official channel for

²¹ The respective amendments are accessible via <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=243485>, „Proposed amendments to the Rules of Procedure”, paragraph 5³, sections 131³, 131⁴ and 131⁵, which were passed on January 19, 2013, and came into force on February 2, 2012.

political participation. ManaBalss.lv therefore managed to facilitate and ease the petition-process significantly. Another law that was passed because of ManaBalss.lv requires owners of offshore Latvian businesses to disclose their identity. It can thus be concluded that the in-depth communication with the political arena in the early stages of the project resulted in a strong and ongoing cooperation that is legally entrenched.

ManaBalss.lv is also tied very closely to the economic society, not least because of financial issues. In fact, 31% of the starting capital was provided by companies with “Inspired Communications” donating 2.850 Lats (ca. 4.500 Euro), “Creative Mobile” sponsoring 2.240 Lats (ca. 3.200 Euro) and “McCann Erickson” giving 5.915 Lats (ca. 8.400 Euro) (LETA, 2011). Information as to what extent ManaBalss.lv’s relations with the private sector go beyond funding are not made, which is why firm conclusions on the quality of this relationship cannot be made.

Financial Resources

As outlined above, initially a large part of ManaBalss.lv’s budget was provided by private corporations. However, the Open Society Foundation Latvia also contributed 5.210 Lats (ca. 7.400 Euro) or 15% of the initial budget respectively. The remaining 27% were defrayed by the founders Kristofs Blaus and Jānis Ertis (LETA, 2011). The portfolio of sponsors is thus rather limited and a heavy financial burden is actually carried by its founders. Nevertheless, this gives also grounds to believe that ManaBalss.lv is fairly autonomous from the political arena. Moreover, the diversity of sponsors in terms of interests they represent immediately suggests that ManaBalss.lv is less accountable to them and not inconvenienced to reflect their wishes.

However, while costs were covered quite effectively in the beginning, in February 2013, only 21 months after its launch, ManaBalss.lv announced that it dearly needed new cash injections. Charity appeals were published on the website itself, but also featured on a number of news sites such as TVnet.lv (LETA, 2013, February 9). Nevertheless, the campaign only resulted in the donation of about 200 Lats (ca. 285 Euro), which is not enough to cover monthly maintenance costs (LETA, 2013, April 26).

Blaus and Erts argue that the scarce financial resources affect the site's capacity. Dozens of emails and calls remain unanswered and submitted initiatives cannot be checked. The founders, who are currently covering the expenses, expressed doubts on how much longer they are actually willing to finance this project. Kristofs Blaus argues that

[W]e, as the founders, cannot promise that we will pay the bills for a website that is required by the Latvian society and used by a lot of people forever. The two of us are always paying the bills – we are not willing to do this for a lifetime. Either the public helps out or large donors join in to help maintain it. (Translated from Latvian; LETA, 2013, April 26).

Ieva Kudure dropped a hint that the website's financial difficulties may be resolved for now. "Recently ManaBalss got funding so there will be one paid position – full time job for one person. It will be a big step for ManaBalss development." (I. Kudure, personal communications, August 2, 2013) However, no specification as to the amount and source of funding were made. Despite this fortunate incident, it appears that financial difficulties are ManaBalss.lv's biggest issue.

Human Resources

According to Jānis Erts, 500.000 Latvians have already visited ManaBalss.lv as of April 08, 2013 (J. Erts, personal communications, April 8, 2013). Since its establishment, the number of visitors is varying quite frequently. According to data received from Kristofs Blaus, ManaBalss.lv had its highest number of unique users, which refers to the number of I.P.-addresses accessing the website, in June 2011, when it was launched. About 120.000 people visited the website back then. After the initial excitement, visits were fluctuating fairly much. Currently, the number of visitors remains steadily at around 40.000 to 60.000 unique users per month (K. Blaus, personal communication, July 30, 2013). However, unique users may only be passive outsiders from all corners of the world, who are not actively participating on the website. It is therefore essential to consider the number of those officially registered to it.

According to an official statement by ManaBalss.lv (2013a), 15% of Latvians are already using the platform. Ieva Kudure maintains that "[T]his means that 15% of

Latvians at least once made a petition or signed a petition. I think this data is a bit old and now it's more than 15%" (I. Kudure, personal communication, August 10, 2013). It can therefore be assumed that ManaBalss.lv has at least 303.578 members²², which is a lot considering the difficulties of traditional associations to mobilize people. Regarding their level of commitment, one can differentiate between members voting for an initiative and those that are actually writing and developing it. Considering that over 500 initiatives have been submitted, it has to be concluded that only about 0.17% of registered users belong to the super-active type of members. As more than one initiative may be submitted by a single user, this number may very well be lower. Hence, while participation in terms of extent is fairly large, it is less so with regards to depth.

Currently, ManaBalss.lv does not have any employees. Both founders, Kristofs Blaus and Jānis Erts, are not paid. Ieva Kudure is a volunteer, too. Nevertheless, as outlined earlier there will be a paid full-time position soon. However, at the moment ManaBalss.lv suffers from the lack of professional staff or volunteers, especially lawyers. According to a statement of Kristofs Blaus from April 2013,

[T]his morning there were more than 50 initiatives waiting for legal approval. In one month, ManaBalss' lawyer can respond to maybe one or two proposals. If nothing changes, if no additional volunteers or donations will reach us, no additional lawyer hired, these initiatives might see the light of the day only in four years. The situation has to change. (LETA, 2013, April 26)

Diversity of Activists

Inferences about the basic characteristics of users are difficult to make. ManaBalss.lv does not keep track of the age, gender, level of education, place of residence and income of its members. Therefore, no data is available to accurately assess any of the indicators in this sub-dimension. When asked about the basic characteristics of ManaBalss.lv's activists, Ieva Kudure argued that they are "[Y]oung, active, tend to think positive, but also have critical thinking skills." With regards to the average age and education of

²² Calculated as 15% of the Latvian population of 2.023.825 in 2013 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2013c).

activists, Kudure believed them to be in their mid-20s and have higher education (I. Kudure, personal communications, August 2, 2013). Similarly, Parliament speaker Solvita Aboltina quoted by *The New York Times* maintained that “[I] think it is noteworthy that mostly young people who wanted to have a tangible impact on the legislative process were behind the initiative.” (McGrane, 2013) Therefore, it at least seems that most members are young and well-educated.

With regards to gender, conclusions can be made for the super-active users, whose initiatives were eventually uploaded to ManaBalss.lv as their names are published together with their petition. Out of 46 initiatives written by individual activists until August 2013, 40 are composed by male activists and only six by female users (ManaBalss, 2013b). Hence, at least in terms of the most active users, there is not much diversity. Yet, they only constitute 0.17% of the total membership of ManaBalss.lv, which is why too firm conclusions cannot be made.

Moreover, ManaBalss.lv’s registration process ensures that users are Latvian citizens, which is why the titular nation certainly dominates here, while non-citizens will not be represented at all, even though they might reside in the country. Moreover, the content is in Latvian language only. Thus, the diversity in terms of national minorities and the representation of Russian speakers respectively is limited a priori.

7.4.2. Politika.lv

Politika.lv was founded in 2001 by the Soros Foundation-Latvia and part of a broader plan to increase the quality of public policy-making. The website was launched as an information resource center for public policy, which compiled policy papers and allowed CSOs and other experts to publish opinion articles and proposals about pressing social and political issues. Hence, while featuring strong analytical and academic parts, it was also designed as an alternative news medium, where an editorial board consisting of journalists and scholars manages and commissions publications. It was thought that by providing in-depth and balanced information on public policy issues, politicians will make more informed and, thus, better decisions. Also, CSOs and activists will be granted a more equal voice in the decisions-making process by providing a platform where they can formulate their concerns and easily access existing policy papers that

were commissioned by the state but not published for public perusal before (N. Ločmele, personal communication, May 17, 2013; K. Baumanė, personal communication, May 17, 2013). In 2003, Politika.lv was taken over by the Public Policy think tank PROVIDUS. According to this think tank, until now Politika.lv is “(...) the main internet source for policy analyses, research and expert opinions on issues and events relevant to Latvian society” (PROVIDUS, 2013a). However, its objectives have developed over the past years and rather than being merely a service provider of information and education, Politika.lv has emerged into a community of like-minded, politically interested individuals, who exchange ideas and engage in constructive debates in order to affect the decision-making process. Currently therefore, the goal of Politika.lv is two-folded: it aims at promoting analyses-based decision-making and enhancing public participation in order to ultimately improve the quality of public policy decisions in Latvia (PROVIDUS, 2013a). In the following, Politika.lv’s organizational infrastructure will be investigated in order to determine the strength of its structural quality in the wider civil society framework.

Level of Organization

Politika.lv covers a wide range of themes, including quality of politics, environment and sustainability, corruption, human rights, social integration, civil society, education and employment, European issues, media as well as elections and referenda (Ruduša, 2008). According to Rita Ruduša, three topics stand out, including the rights of sexual minorities, party financing and corruption. “Those were the main topics that really got most resonance in society and a lot of activity online, a lot of quoting in mainstream media and also other online media (...).” (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013)

The rights of sexual minorities appeared on Politika.lv’s agenda when the first Gay Pride parades in Riga of 2003 and 2005 were accompanied by a lot of violence and homophobic political rhetoric. According to Rita Ruduša, Politika.lv was the first organization to make same-sex relationships an important subject of political discussion. In supporting LGBT-rights, “(...)Politika took a very strong stand and

attracted a lot of attention and was most certainly an opinion leader.”²³ (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013)

In cooperation with PROVIDUS, Politika.lv addressed the issue of party financing, because of the dubious and untransparent ways through which political parties received and spent their budget in the late 1990s and 2000s. Politika.lv and PROVIDUS

(...) played a big role in monitoring, disclosing the violations of existing laws, the ways that parties bypass the laws and exceed the limits and build up some loopholes to pour more money into advertising (...). And also in proposing legislative changes that would change this regime. (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013)²⁴

While Politika.lv got a lot of attention from the general public, this topic also made the organization and PROVIDUS “(...) very unpopular with the political elite, because we stepped on some toes by disclosing the shady practices in party financing.” (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013).

Closely related to the issue of party financing is the third key topic of Politika.lv, namely corruption.

Compared to homophobic speech and the whole homophobia and same-sex partner topic, which was big in numbers, and party financing, which also attracted a lot of attention, this maybe wasn't that popular, but it nevertheless was one of the key topics and something that really nobody else did, certainly not to the same extent and same quality as we did. (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013)

²³ Examples of publications on the topic of same-sex partnerships and rights of sexual minorities (all in Latvian) can be retrieved from <http://politika.lv/article/valsts-sarga-gimenes-visas> (“The state protects families. All?”), <http://politika.lv/article/ta-problema-nav-prioritate> (“This problem” does not have priority”), <http://politika.lv/article/sekla-vai-milestiba> (“Seed or love”), <http://politika.lv/article/partiju-viedokli-par-seksualo-minoritasu-jautajumiem> (“Party’s views on the issue of sexual minorities”), <http://politika.lv/article/neredzamas-viena-dzimuma-partneru-gimenes-latvija> (“‘Invisible’ same-sex families in Latvia”), <http://politika.lv/article/homofobiska-runa-latvija-politiku-monitorings> (“Homophobic speech in Latvia: political monitoring”)

²⁴ An interview on the topic of party financing can be retrieved from <http://politika.lv/article/i-do-not-need-your-money-sasha>

Especially during what has been later termed the “Umbrella Revolution”, Politika.lv strongly supported the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) not only in investigating cases of corruption in the political arena, but also to help keep it in the public eye, “(...) to also analyze and disclose whatever surreptitious legal changes were happening that would weaken the institution (...)”. In doing so, Politika.lv contributed to public education and awareness about corruption in the country²⁵ (R. Rudaša, personal communication, August 2, 2013).

In order to attract attention for these topics and realize its objectives, Politika.lv has introduced diverse content items on its website. Among others, it is an information resource center on public policy, which is illustrated by the large amount of high-quality articles, policy briefs and reviews as well as research papers accessible on the website. The authors are either located in-house and employees of the mother institution PROVIDUS, or experts and academics that are hired from outside the organization’s infrastructure. However, Politika.lv also features a number of opinion articles and interviews to provide a more balanced perspective on its topics (Rudaša, 2008; R. Rudaša, personal communication, August 2, 2013).

A series of interviews with political candidates has resulted in the online device or electoral compass respectively called “Try on a Party!”, which was introduced by Politika.lv in 2002. Politicians were confronted with a questionnaire that would reveal their political values and attitudes. Users are answering the same questions and, subsequently, can compare their viewpoints with those of candidates and ascertain which party represents them best. This invention has been copied by many other institutions, such as the European Union and Germany, ever since it was introduced and, thus, reflects the pioneering role Politika.lv assumes in enhancing public participation in politics (K. Baumanė, personal communication, May 17, 2013; N. Ločmele, personal communication, May 17, 2013).

Another service that is no less innovative and influential is e-consultation, which has been introduced by Politika.lv in 2006. State institutions and CSOs were invited to submit and “crowdsource” their policy ideas. Published on the website, Politika.lv’s users could vote and comment on them, suggest amendments and changes. Thereby, solutions on policy issues are found and developed in cooperation with the general

²⁵ A publication on anti-corruption can be retrieved from <http://politika.lv/article/hush-hush-legislation>

public. In 2006, for instance, the Ministry for Regional Development and Municipal Affairs used this service to develop the National Development Plan. In 2007, the Center for Academic Integrity formulated the guidelines on academic integrity after an e-consultation with Politika.lv (Ruduša, 2008). According to Rita Ruduša, Politika.lv was the first organization to launch this service, which has expanded, improved and become more sophisticated ever since. In 2011, PROVIDUS decided to establish a separate platform, MusuValsts.lv, which took over the service and is focused on e-consultations only (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013).

In order to strengthen the communication between the civil and political society, Politika.lv also organizes round table and public discussions on a monthly basis, during which decision-makers and opinion leaders as well as the general public are invited to engage in constructive debates and exchange ideas. These discussions are usually transcribed and uploaded or directly broadcasted on the website (I. Straustiņa, personal communication, August 6 & 9, 2013). However, Politika.lv also aims at maintaining its own community of like-minded, politically interested individuals and users. The organization has also introduced the possibility of posting and responding to comments under each of its publications. Moreover, Politika.lv was among the first blogging platforms in Latvia. Hence, in addition to reading and discussing issues, users can also apply for having their own blog on the website, in which they can draw attention to and initiate debates on political and social issues that they deem important. These are usually provocative topics, such as feminism and racism among others. These blogs, too, can be commented on and responded to. Nevertheless, it is essential to mention that bloggers are carefully selected among people that are assumed to be opinion leaders and adhere to Open Society standards²⁶ in order to maintain the high level of quality that Politika.lv usually demonstrates (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). It thus appears that Politika.lv is organized on a very professional level and maintains an elitist approach through high-quality and in-depth information, debates and blogs. This focus is however helpful during fund-seeking, which Politika.lv also undertakes (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). The organization can apply for EU-

²⁶ This refers to the values promoted by the Open Society Foundations, Politika.lv's main source of funding: <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/mission-values>

funded projects and receive grants linked to specific research projects, which require certain capacities and skills.

Apart from round table discussions, Politika.lv has also engaged in other “offline” activities. According to Nelliņa Ločmele, the organization was the first in Latvia that brought together diverse Latvian NGOs, gathered and aggregated their ideas and demands and communicated them to the political society. By becoming a so-called umbrella organization looking after the needs of NGOs, Politika.lv played an important role in strengthening their position in the political decision-making process and compelling respect for their work. Moreover, Politika.lv organized and engaged in a number of peaceful protest activities. For instance, because it believed the selection process to be obscure, Politika.lv demonstrated against the government’s choice of the first European Commissioner after Latvia’s EU accession. Also, during a public appearance of former President Vaira-Vīķe Freiberga, the organization opposed one of her statements, in which she roughly claimed that “(...) it’s not so important for society to really talk and express their views and (...) politicians know what to do.” (N. Ločmele, personal communication, May 17, 2013)

In order to mobilize the public and maintain its community, Politika.lv is also interlinked with a number of social networks. In fact, it was one of the first websites to introduce a Twitter account in Latvia in 2009 and has constantly increased its Twitter audience. Politika.lv is also registered with YouTube, Facebook, Draugiem.lv, and a number of other social networks. The organization uses these accounts to inform about news related to PROVIDUS, new articles published on its website and to initiate discussions on the issues it deems important for society. Twitter is also used during the round table and public discussions for transcribing or highlighting what has been said by the panelists or audience (I. Straustiņa, personal communication, August 6, 2013). Mobilization through social media and networks is therefore of high priority to Politika.lv.

The topics and activities Politika.lv engages in are both socially and politically relevant. Politika.lv does not shy away from addressing issues that are clearly elite-challenging and thereby makes the government more accountable. This immediately suggests that Politika.lv meets its democratic functions in monitoring the government. At the same time, it strongly focuses on marginalized groups and minorities, supports

their cause and amplifies their voice. This serves to illustrate that the organization is fairly inclusive and does not only reflect majority attitudes. However, while the topics are confrontational, the activities Politika.lv engages in are of more reserved nature. Information gathering and the provision of high-quality information to improve policy decision-making and educate the public is the very foundation of Politika.lv, which is complemented by networking, mobilization and lobbying activities to strengthen the impact of civil society on the political sphere. Political participation is enhanced by means of online devices, including an electoral compass and e-consultation services. Contentious politics plays only a minor role. At times, Politika.lv engages in unconventional activities, such as legal demonstrations. Thus, while the content is elite-challenging, the actual activities are largely non-confrontational and designed to fit in the more traditional channels of political participation in the democratic polity.

Inter-Relations

Politika.lv's relation to other CSOs is very well developed. As outlined above, Politika.lv was the first umbrella organization to put Latvian NGOs on one table and unite their voices. Hence, it did not only engage in networking activities, but actually promoted and improved the cooperation between CSOs. When addressing the rights of sexual minorities, Politika.lv has also cooperated with Mozaika, a Latvian LGBT-rights organization (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). Moreover, Politika.lv organizes public discussions in cooperation with the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation on a monthly basis. According to Ilze Straustiņa, the organization also works closely with other NGOs, such as Delna (Latvia's Transparency International) or homo ecos (environmental NGO), as well as think tanks, for example the Latvian Institute of International Affairs. Moreover, Politika.lv cooperates with the biggest Latvian news webpages DELFI.lv and TVnet.lv, which are republishing its articles and participate as informative partners in some activities (I. Straustiņa, personal communication, August 6, 2013). It can therefore be concluded that Politika.lv does not online communicate extensively with other CSOs, but engages in in-depth cooperation to reach common objectives. Inter-relations with other CSOs are therefore well-

developed both in terms of extent and depth. It is worth mentioning that Politika.lv also does transnational networking.

Relationship with other Arenas

The ties between Politika.lv and the political society are very well-developed. However, this is not to say that there is a relationship of dependency and the latter is always well-disposed. In contrast, Politika.lv communicates and cooperates with political institutions and individuals to enforce its claims, which means that at times politicians get into a scrape. Hence, there has been a very close and productive collaboration with the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) to disclose malpractice and support the institution, when it had a lot of opposition from other political figures. During e-consultations, Politika.lv has also cooperated with the Latvian Ministry for Regional Development and Municipal Affairs or the Riga City Council (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013).

Moreover, Politika.lv's and by affiliation PROVIDUS' efforts have been very fruitful in affecting the decision-making process and yielding legislative changes. According to Nellija Ločmele, Politika.lv's insistence on having all policy papers published has led the government to change the process of how studies can be commissioned by the state and make it more accessible for the public. Politika.lv's position as umbrella-organization resulted in amendments and special paragraphs on public participation to be introduced in the government program. For example, it was decided that all draft law has to be reviewed by a forum of NGOs, which guarantees the participation of civil society in the very initial stages of the decision-making process (N. Ločmele, personal communication, May 17, 2013). Additionally, when dealing with party financing, Politika.lv and PROVIDUS have contributed to tighter regulations on political parties' expenses during election periods, certain democratic rules being incorporated in party law and the introduction of state funding for political parties (I. Kažoka, personal communication, May 17, 2013).

However, according to Iveta Kažoka, Politika.lv's main influence on the political society comes from the in-depth articles that are re-published and quoted by journalists and in the news media or picked-up and discussed vividly on Twitter by

individual activists. Because of their high quality and the immense public interest they attract they are eventually discussed by politicians, developed further and considered in the decision-making process (I. Kažoka, personal communication, May 17, 2013).

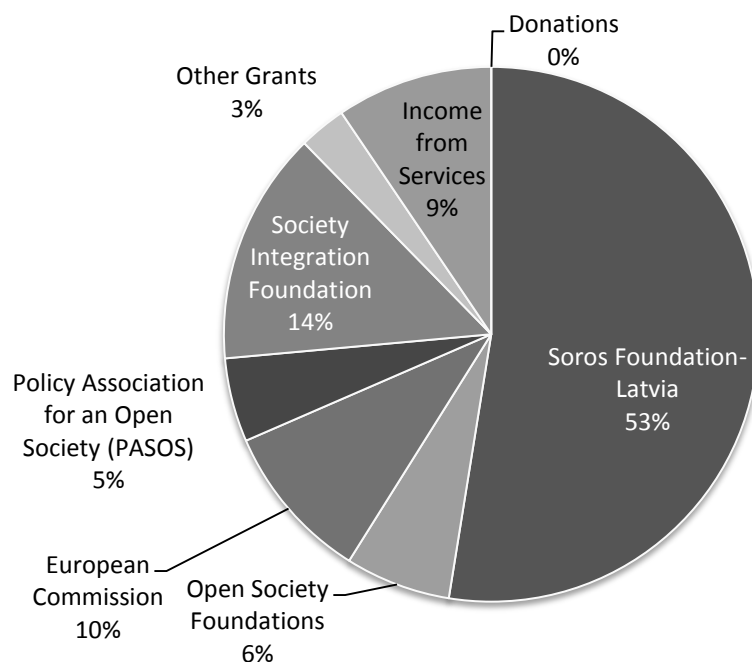
In contrast to the former, Politika.lv's relationship with the economic society seems to be in its infancy. Rita Ruduša claims that attempts to either win corporations over as donors or have them participate in round tables or public discussion have been difficult. "Businesses didn't want to be seen affiliated with somebody who irritates politicians." Because of provocative and controversial topics challenging the political society, companies shied away from partnering up with Politika.lv (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). Hence, there is a mixed picture with regards to the relationships with other arenas. While there is a lot of communication going on between Politika.lv and the political society, which has brought about in-depth cooperation and real-life changes, ties to the economic society are dormant.

Financial Resources

Since the takeover in 2003, Politika.lv's funds are directly linked to PROVIDUS. The latter manages one account that allocates a certain budget to each of its projects and organizations, including Politika.lv. This is true even when Politika.lv engages in individual fund-seeking activities (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). For 2011, PROVIDUS provides a detailed list of its sources of funding, which is illustrated in Figure 2.

It clearly demonstrates that even after 12 years of existence, the Soros Foundation-Latvia remains the single most important source of funding for both PROVIDUS and Politika.lv. Since the Soros Foundation-Latvia actually belongs to the Open Society Foundations, it can be concluded that 59% of Politika.lv's funding stems from one large source. Other important but smaller backings are coming from the Society Integration Foundation Latvia, which is mainly supplied by state or EU money, as well as the European Commission and the Policy Association for an Open Society.

Figure 2. PROVIDUS' Sources of Funding in 2011



Source: PROVIDUS (2013b).

The portfolio of sponsors is fairly limited with Politika.lv being very much dependent on one source. Even though this does not seem to affect Politika.lv's autonomy, at least when considering the broad range of elite-challenging topics, it is nevertheless problematic, because "(...) Open Society is winding down its operations in this part of the world." (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013) According to Krista Baumanė, it is thought that Latvian organizations are in less need of foreign funding, since the European Union and economic development in Latvia have brought about other sources they can rely on. Thus, donors that usually supported civil society activities and CSOs are slowly withdrawing their funds (K. Baumanė, personal communication, May 17, 2013). In the light of these developments, it is argued that PROVIDUS and Politika.lv are very active in attracting new funds and diversifying the sources of the same. The organization participates regularly in public tenders by government institutions or foundations that distribute money to NGOs (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). Nevertheless, it seems that attracting funds from the economic society remains untried, not least due to the almost non-existent relationship with private corporations. Hence, the controversy and level of confrontation

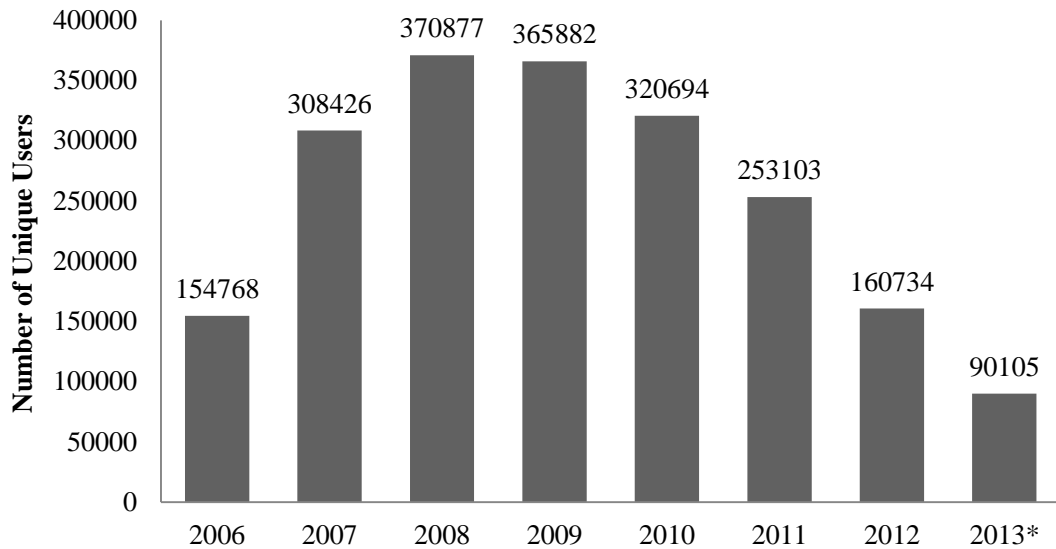
of topics seem to be problematic in this regard and contribute to the financial difficulties by alienating companies.

Since the economic crisis, the financial situation is difficult and continues to affect Politika.lv's organizational infrastructure. During the crisis less money was available to hire external academics and experts, which is why the number of authors shrunk substantially. Moreover, Politika.lv had to shut down its English version. Because of these developments, Politika.lv lost large parts of its audience (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). Last year, Politika.lv also had to cut down its editorial team and relinquish the position of the editor-in-chief due to financial strains. Moreover, it still lacks money to commission scientific papers or in-depth articles from authors outside of the organization (I. Kažoka, personal communication, May 17, 2013). Therefore, the financial situation of the organization seems to be critical. Lacking funds have forced Politika.lv to reduce the number of employees, give up some quality content and, ultimately, lose some supporters and members. According to Iveta Kažoka the future of Politika.lv, at least in terms of how it is going to look like and what to do with it, still does not seem to be clear. "[A]t the moment, we are still thinking about what to do with the internet portal next." (I. Kažoka, personal communication, May, 17, 2013)

Human Resources

Data on unique users provided by Marta Herca is only available from 2006 onwards and illustrated in Figure 3. The graph clearly shows that Politika.lv had its heyday in 2008 and 2009, when more than 350.000 I.P.-addresses connected to the website per year. Since then, the number of unique users has steadily decreased, which may very well be due to the financial difficulties as outlined above. In 2012, there were only 160.734 unique users, which is less than half of the figures in 2008 and 2009. According to official information provided by PROVIDUS, there are about 30.000 unique users per months (PROVIDUSa, 2013).

Figure 3. Unique Users of Politika.lv Since 2006



* The data only shows unique users until August 5, 2013.

Source: M. Herca, personal communication, August 5, 2013.

However, unique users do not provide much information about the actual number of registered and active members. According to Marta Herca, 5062 email addresses are subscribed to Politika.lv's newsletter and, hence, registered with the organization (M. Herca, personal communication, August 9, 2013). Nevertheless, in order to determine the actual depth of participation, one should also consider the number of bloggers. Marta Herca maintains that a total of 50 users have the permission to blog. As of May 24, 2013, though, there are only 5 active bloggers posting at least once or twice a month, while others do not publish anything on a regular basis (M. Herca, personal communication, May 24, 2013). Thus, Politika.lv lacks super-active members, while most of them are rather passive or semi-active respectively.

Because of the financial situation, Politika.lv and PROVIDUS had to cut down personnel. Currently, Politika.lv is managed by two employees only: Ilze Straustiņa and Marta Herca. Hence, no editorial board or editor-in-chief overlooks and contributes to Politika.lv's activities. Therefore, there are fewer resources available to mobilize users and expand the website. According to Rita Ruduša, for instance, more bloggers would be needed to maintain and further develop the blogging platform. Nevertheless, this would consume more time in terms of managing and monitoring their posts.

Additionally, existing bloggers have to be regularly contacted and reminded to post something (R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). Capacities in terms of staff do not suffice to keep up with such tasks. Therefore, the limited amount of employees also reduces the opportunities Politika.lv has to reach its objectives.

Diversity of Participants

In 2010, Politika.lv conducted a survey asking about 20.000 of its unique users to reveal their basic characteristics. With regards to age, data shows that users are mostly young and below 34 years old. More than half of them occupy the age range between 15 and 34 years. Another fifth indicated to be between 35 and 44 years old. Moreover, activists are predominantly female. 60% of respondents were women. About 52% of them are either located in Riga or live in the district of Riga. Rural regions are barely represented. 27% of users have a net income between 126 and 300 Lats per month (ca. 180 – 427 Euro), which is below the population average of 305 Lats (ca. 434 Euro) monthly net salary in January 2010 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2013d). 19% earn between 301 and 500 Lats net income per month (ca. 428 – 711 Euro). The rest is evenly distributed among lower or higher income groups. In terms of education, 39% of users have a university degree, while 15% of them started higher education programs (M. Herca, personal communication, August 5, 2013). Thus, most activists are well-educated. This corresponds to observations made by Iveta Kažoka and Rita Ruduša, who claim that Politika.lv is extensively used by students for all the quality information that is free of charge (I. Kažoka, personal communication, May 17, 2013; R. Ruduša, personal communication, August 2, 2013). Moreover, 57% of respondents were Latvian and only 21% Russian (M. Herca, personal communication, August 5, 2013). However, this may be rather due to the fact that Politika.lv currently operates only in Latvian language than a result of deliberate exclusion. According to Ilze Straustiņa,

[W]e have considered to allow some people to blog in Politika.lv in Russian, but never have taken a decision on that. If there would be a research paper in Russian, we would definitely publish it in Russian with summary in Latvian, the same as we do with research papers in English. (I. Straustiņa, personal communication, September 5, 2013)

Marta Herca further specifies that

[A]t the very beginning there was an idea to have it [Politika.lv] also in Russian, but because of human resources and finances they decided first to launch Latvian version and see how it goes. And also the other argument not to have it was because at that time Russian version of Delfi (<http://rus.delfi.lv/>) was quite strong and also other internet media in Russian. (M. Herca, personal communication, September 6, 2013)

Hence, Politika.lv undertook several efforts to make the platform more inclusive with regard to languages, but again mostly because of financial and staff shortages this was not viable. Russian-speakers and others are not excluded a priori and Politika.lv undertakes great efforts to be as inclusive as possible, which is shown by the topics it covers. Yet, the focus on Latvian language has certainly its bearing on the diversity of participants in terms of representing other nationalities.

Based on these findings, one can assume that Politika.lv's typical user is a young Latvian female, who lives in Riga or its surroundings, does not necessarily represent a higher income group, and has or currently is acquiring a university degree. Hence, diversity of participants is limited, especially due to the underrepresentation of rural residents and Russians.

7.5. Summary and Interpretation of Findings

Both ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv have a large support base, even though there are significant differences in terms of the extent. ManaBalss.lv has about 300.000 registered members and Politika.lv only about 5.000 newsletter subscribers. However, this is still remarkable, especially in comparison to Uhlin's (2010: 840) study, who finds that Latvia consists of small NGOs with few members. It is essential to mention, though, that activity levels of users are fluctuating and super-active members are rather uncommon; they largely prefer to participate in already existing projects instead of developing their own ideas, for example in blogs or by writing petitions. This corresponds to the findings on the individual level made in the previous chapter.

Activists in both organizations are mostly young and well-educated. In financial terms, Politika.lv's users are not necessarily better positioned than the average Latvian.

This, too, is a notable finding when compared to traditional CSOs, which according to Uhlin (2010: 838) consist of elderly and better off members. Moreover, it seems that both CSOs do not have any difficulties with mobilizing younger members.

Unfortunately, there is no sufficient data to make firm conclusions about the gender composition of ManaBalss.lv's activists. Nevertheless, super-active members are predominantly male, while in general most of Politika.lv's users are female. Indeed, all the former or current staff members of Politika.lv or PROVIDUS respectively, who were interviewed for this study, are women. In the light of the enormous impact Politika.lv has on the decision-making process, this finding challenges Uhlin's (2006: 65-67) interpretation that a surplus of female members could indicate that CSOs are less powerful in patriarchic societies, where predominantly men occupy important political or economic positions.

Moreover, Uhlin argues that Latvian CSOs are largely non-political and not at all confrontational and, ultimately, questions whether they can fulfill their functions for democracy (Uhlin, 2010: 842; 844). Based on the findings for ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv, this point of view cannot be shared. Both organizations deal with topics that are highly relevant both politically and socially and raise issues that are elite-challenging and controversial. Their efforts are largely successful and even resulted in legislative changes. Even though confrontational activities are not undertaken too often, it seems that ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv engage in them more frequently than found by Uhlin (2010) for his sample of traditional organizations. Especially Politika.lv, which features strong relationships both to other CSOs and the political society, actually serves to illustrate a good example for what has been termed "transactional activism" by Petrova and Tarrow (2007: 84), where ties between CSOs and them and the state are developing and strengthening.

However, what seems to set ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv apart most from traditional CSOs is that they are not so much organized around a single specific agenda or certain content, which they have set for themselves. In contrast, especially ManaBalss.lv is merely a framework that is supposed to be filled with the ideas and demands of its users. ManaBalss.lv's activists largely dictate its content and not vice versa. What follows is issue-based networking of individual activists at a grassroots level: a large amount of individuals cast their vote for one particular idea that they

would like to see implemented. Even though on a smaller scale, Politika.lv has also freed up some space that is filled by its users to draw attention to what they deem important, i.e. in blogs. The political and social relevance and quality of these concerns is ensured due to the selection process of either initiatives or bloggers. At first glance, the organizations may appear to be rather elitist because of that. However, this is not to be compared with the elitist characteristic that has been identified for post-communist CSOs by previous research. ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv are not detached from society but take the lead in terms of the quality of content. And because the ideas that are expressed through ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv do have real political consequences, it is justified to argue that these organizations are indeed pioneering and innovative in that they change Latvia's civil society landscape by making it stronger both in terms of its quantity and quality.

The greatest challenges the organizations in the sample encounter are financial difficulties, which affect their work severely. While ManaBalss.lv cannot keep up with its workload and needs additional funds and volunteers to maintain the website in the future, Politika.lv had to cut down on its content and personnel and, ultimately, lost a considerable part of its audience. This is the weakest point that the analysis of the organizational infrastructure revealed and indeed corresponds to one of Uhlin's findings on the quality structure of civil society in the Baltic States and Russia (Uhlin, 2006: 68).

8. CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation is to fill in the gap left by the existing academic literature on post-communist civil society in general and particularly in Latvia, which nearly unanimously agrees on its weakness and comparable underdevelopment. This gap did not only emerge due to the simple absence of recent investigations of civil society especially after 2004, but even more so because existing conceptualizations have not sufficiently accounted for two specific forms of participation: contentious activities and internet activism.

Ulrich Beck (2001) once argued that “[T]he most precise statement that can be made about civil society is that it is an extraordinarily vague idea.” (Translated from German; Beck, 2001: 15) However, in contrast to many previous studies, the conceptualization of civil society advocated in this paper does not attempt to put the idea in concrete forms, but rather specify indicators on the basis of which its structure can be investigated. In other words, it focuses on what civil society is composed of and not how it looks like. By assuming that civil society fulfills certain functions for democracy, an operational concept was developed that allows for measuring the extent to which it does and can actually meet these purposes and thereby translates the idea into more graspable terms.

The functional perspective has produced exciting results: Latvian civil society is not weak. Contentious activities are widely used by many Latvians, who demonstrate a high level of activism. Participants prefer confrontational and largely peaceful actions. Similar findings can be made for internet activism, which enjoys great popularity, too. Yet, internet users demonstrate a lower level of activity and commitment. These findings are in contrast to what has been revealed for more traditional civil society activities, such as associational membership offline.

The organizational infrastructure of the two online CSOs studied in this paper reveals that they can also rely on a large support base and especially with regards to ManaBalss.lv engage in grassroots activities that have been absent in Latvia for a long time, if previous research is to be believed. These findings do not confirm the elitist

perspective on democracy that has been found to be present among Latvians (Uhlen, 2010: 847). Latvians are ready to devote time to the common good and do so in remarkable numbers. Both organizations have a significant impact on the decision-making process and brought about legislative changes. They fulfill their democratic functions, wherever possible. This gives ground to believe that participatory and transactional activism and, thus, a strong civil society both in terms of its extent, inter-relations and the relationship with the political society are present in Latvia (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007).

Nevertheless, it would be premature to linger over the very optimistic picture of Latvian civil society drawn thus far. The quality structure of Politika.lv and ManaBalss.lv has revealed considerable financial difficulties that severely affect the work of the organizations. ManaBalss.lv lacks funds to maintain its website and staff members that cope with the work load. This is true despite the fact that the portfolio of sponsors seems to be well-balanced between corporate and private grants. Apparently, ManaBalss.lv has found a new sponsor. However, the question is how long the budget will last considering the usual lack of available funds. Politika.lv, on the other hand, struggles with financial difficulties since the economic crisis of 2008, which has affected the content, staff and visits to the website. Personnel had to be laid off, external authors could not be hired, content was reduced to Latvian language only and a considerable number of users ultimately left the website. Politika.lv was and still is very much dependent on one single source of funding and clearly needs to expand its portfolio of sponsors, which is however impossible without any alternative source willing to help or the persistence of dormant ties with the economic society. Latvian civil society, at least in terms of contentious activities and internet activism, is not weak, but it seems to be threatened. As opposed to arguments put forward in previous research, it appears that the financial situation is the single most important aspect determining the state of affairs of CSOs. While they are very active, especially when the political quality of the country suffers, financial strains limit their means of dealing. Resources, such as public and private funds, have to be activated and re-located to support CSOs, such as ManaBalss.lv and Politika.lv. Otherwise, the sustainability of this important aspect of the democratic polity may not be guaranteed.

Future research has to address this issue. A functional perspective should be used to revisit the academic debate on civil society in all post-communist countries for two reasons: to investigate the actual strength of civil society in the region and if necessary correct existing portraits of its state of affairs, and, even more so, to analyze possible weaknesses in its organizational infrastructure. The fate of civil society is not predetermined but changeable. And for the sake of democracy, it is essential to develop solutions that either help strengthening or sustaining it.

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