

## Internet, Activism and Politics. The Repertoires and Rhetoric of Estonian Internet Activists

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### Abstract

The literature on political participation and activism has gained from introducing a new term: 'sub-activism', which is used to describe individual, mostly internet-mediated activism of everyday choices. Yet there is ongoing work dedicated to the question of how these everyday choices relate to other repertoires of activism. Why do people choose to participate in politics in one form rather than in another? This paper contributes to the field by analysing the rhetoric and repertoire of activists who are organised around two NGOs: the Estonian Pirate Party and the Estonian Internet Society. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, analyses of online materials, and 15 in-depth interviews, findings indicate that the choice of repertoire is strongly connected to the activists' views on the internet, activism and politics. Most importantly, understanding what 'politics' stands for influences the choice of sub-activism as suitable or unsuitable action for these groups. These findings are then discussed in the context of East European 'apolitical' activism and civil society.

**Keywords:** political activism, political rhetoric and repertoire, internet, sub-politics, East European non-political civil society.

### Introduction

In recent years, politics seems to be suffering a decline of popularity. One of the symptoms of this is the diminishing political participation of young people in terms of voting and joining political parties (EACEA, 2013; Kestila-Kekkonen, 2009; Hay, 2007; Stoker, 2006). However, it has been proposed that the decline could be at least partly attributed to changing forms of participation, so these classical ways to measure participation do not capture what is actually going on. Young people want and do participate, only through alternative channels such as NGOs, protests and demonstrations, consumption and direct action (Kiisel, Leppik, Seppel, 2015; EACEA, 2013; Hay, 2007). Of course, attention towards new kinds of social repertoires of politics and civil activism is not new itself. The ideas that instead of following traditionally modern and institutionalised channels such as political parties or youth councils young people rather focus on change stemming from and aiming at lifestyle choices is the core argument of the 'new social movements' theoretical framework emerging already in the 60s and 70s (Buechler, 1995). Recent addition to the theory has been influenced by the rising role of the internet and other ICT possibilities such as mobile phones, especially in the lives of young people (Auškalnienė, 2012; Collin, 2008; Vromen, 2007; 2003).

Aiming to capture the changing modes of political participation that encompass various everyday activities and the role of the internet in it, Maria Bakardjieva (2009) has proposed the term 'sub-activism'. Contributing significantly to the institutional understanding of 'political', the term explores the meaning of 'political' from a cultural perspective, helping us to see how everyday activities can be

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understood as a political repertoire. Although sub-activism is often used to analyse online activism, it is not limited to it. Rather, online activities form a part of a larger sub-activism repertoire. In her article, Maria Bakardijeva (2009) states that:

*Sub-activism in my definition is a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life. It is constituted by small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured.* (Bakardijeva, 2009, p. 92)

At the same time, traditional repertoire of political participation has not disappeared completely. There has been a heated debate over the questions whether and to what extent the online participation translates back into offline participation (Campante, Durante & Sobbrío, 2013; Ikeda, Richey & Teresi, 2013; Gibso & Cantijoch, 2013; Liu, Liao, Sung & Peng, 2012; Spaiser, 2012; Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2010). It has been noted that the internet may be an especially effective means of reaching out to young people who do not wish to participate in mainstream politics because they feel it is 'top-down and adult-managed' (Auškalnienė, 2012, p. 107) and getting them involved offline (Collin, 2008). There is a body of literature that defends the 'normalisation thesis' of civic activism, stating that youth who are active online are also active offline. These young people, who are at the same time also from higher socio-economic environment, are a contrast to others who are inactive both offline and online (Chadwick, 2006). Online participation may even increase offline participation in civil and political issues because it exposes people to a wider range of political views (Ikeda, Richey & Teresi, 2013). For example, although Hirzalla and van Zoonen (2010) do not use the term sub-activism their research indicates that 'discussing civic issues with friends, family, and colleagues' (Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2010, p. 486) is relatively independent of the medium (offline or online). Others, on the other hand, see that internet activism actually draws young people away from other types of more effective forms of activism offline. This kind of pseudo-activism is referred to as slacktivism and consists of activities such as joining a Facebook group or displaying a political slogan (Christensen, 2011).

So although we are now fairly certain that young people do participate through online and everyday activities, we do not really know how everyday activism turns (or does not turn) into more institutionalised politics or activism and why. One of the questions that need to be answered in this regard is what young people themselves think of these changing channels or repertoires of politics. Is resorting to sub-activism a reflexive choice or a result of external constraints, such as the consolidation of political class or the influence of public discourse; or to what extent these factors influence the repertoire of political activism? It seems that this question has relevance also because it reveals the changing discourses of what 'politics' or 'activism' mean, what are the boundaries between the 'civic/political' and the 'uncivic/unpolitical' and from whose perspective these boundaries ought to be drawn (Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2010; Banaji, Buckingham, van Zoonen & Hirzalla, 2009; Dahlberg, 2001).

This paper examines the connections between different forms of sub-activism and other repertoires of political activism based on the case of organisational and discursive practices of a group of young internet activists in Estonia, who are concerned about the regulations and roles of the internet. These young people are gathered around two organisations: the Estonian Pirate Party (PP)<sup>1</sup> and the Estonian Internet Society (EIK). The organisations were formed in 2009 and participated in the civil protest against the ACTA treaty and political consolidation in 2011. PP also participated in an electoral list at local elections in 2013. The group of relatively young people (majority of them in their 20s) that are behind these organisations converges to some extent (7 members that were interviewed belong to

1 Although the name of the Pirate Party refers to a political party it is not registered as one. According to Estonian legislation only NGOs with at least 500 members can officially register as political parties. Only NGOs registered as parties can set up candidates at parliamentary elections while electoral lists with considerable little bureaucratic requirements can be set up for local government and European Parliament elections.

both organisations) and their repertoires of activism also have similarities. Yet, as I will discuss in this paper, stemming from their different views on the internet, activism and politics, the trajectories of these people's repertoires have significant differences.

## Theories of activism and politics

In a thorough and acclaimed book 'Why we hate politics?' Colin Hay (2007) elaborates on the different meanings of politics. Although perhaps the clearest may be to use the term politics for describing only an arena that consists of government institutions, it is also the most restrictive and not suitable to describe the current reality. Instead of defining politics as an arena, it should be seen as a social process of deliberation that entails capacity for agency and a possibility of choice. So issues can be politicised and depoliticised while moving through private, public and governmental spheres (Hay 2007, pp. 61-65, 79-89). Therefore, the 'layout' of politics entails an institutionalised core with a set of clearly defined rules and procedures. Outside this central arena lies a public sphere of activism and social movements, something that Ulrich Beck has identified as 'sub-politics' (1994; 1997). At the outskirts of politics, we have the sub-activism of everyday life (-style) choices of individuals who address public issues and have 'either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both)' (Bakardjieva 2009, p. 92). Sub-activism verges on the border of private and public spheres, between individual and group choices. This kind of liminal position made possible by the internet has been described as one of the defining characteristics of this emerging type of political repertoire (Theocharis, Lowe, van Deth et al., 2015; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010).

If our aim is to understand the choices of young people, we should try to define how these definitions look like from the standpoint of the practitioner. As Hays (2007, pp. 66-67) stresses, one of the key characteristics of any form of 'politics' is its capacity for agency. Holzer and Sorensen (2001) indicate that there are two ways of understanding notions of 'sub-politics' (Beck, 1994) and 'life politics' (Giddens, 1994) from the viewpoint of the subjects: the first is suitable to describe individuals and NGOs who 'aim to do' politics outside traditional political institutions, and in the other case (for example, in the technical-economic subsystem) they are passive in the sense that their aim is not to gain political power or do politics per se. Yet, analysing online piracy as political activism, Lindgren and Linde (2012) state that the cosmology, techniques or organisational forms of a social movement are not necessarily 'explicit or obvious, even to the activists themselves' (Lindgren & Linde, 2012, p. 146). Therefore, from the standpoint of activists an action may or may not be framed or understood as political, but while there is less need to make their choices explicit as an individual, this is more so when these individuals form a group and participate in a social movement aiming for a change in institutional politics. Thus, we could summarise the different levels of politics and the corresponding repertoires of action as follows in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Three levels of politics

Level of politics	Corresponding action	Perceived as politics?
Politics	Institutionalised: voting, running for office, negotiating legislation	Explicitly
Sub-politics/Activism	Semi-institutionalised: lobbying, protesting, writing articles	Explicitly or implicitly
Sub-activism	Lifeworld: (online) discussions, (online) piracy, consumption	Explicitly or implicitly

Source: author's compilation based on Beck (1994; 1997); Bakardjieva (2009); Hirzalla and van Zoonen (2010)

Writing about the social movement organisations, for Melucci (1996) the choice of repertoire by a group or organisation is influenced by both internal factors and external factors. Ideology and leadership are part of internal factors; for example, a pacifist group would probably not be involved in violent protests or an anti-capitalist group in raising money from big corporations. External factors include public opinion and the reaction of partners (both adversaries e.g., politicians and other social movement organisations). Bakardjieva herself (2009, p. 94) stresses the role of external factors, noting that “positions that are considered apolitical at a certain point in time can turn into loci of conflict and antagonism and lead to political mobilization and new forms of struggle under different conditions and changed discursive dynamics”. On the other hand, in a very clear account of various online repertoires and their typology, Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) merely mention that the choice between repertoires is ‘manifold’ and is mainly influenced by internal factors, such as the identity, ideological considerations and resources of group (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010, p. 1151). I will, therefore, focus on external factors of the selected case and describe how Estonian internet activists fit into the context of Eastern European anti-political activism before I turn to the internal factors.

## **Estonian anti-political activism**

The Eastern European context becomes relevant because its history of civil society takes a variety of forms, and the ways in which activism is understood are manifold. During the Soviet rule, and especially during its last years, opposition to the communist regime was conceptualised as a part of the society separate from the state and its totalitarian institutions. Because the oppression of opposition by the state apparatus was common and violent, the dissident philosophy that rejected the pursuit of power by open opposition was referred to as ‘antipolitics’ (Konrad, 1984) and the sphere of civil society as a parallel polis. In general, processes in the civil society were seen as operating within the system rather than attempting to overthrow the system (Brannan, 2003). What became important though was the moral and ethical component of civil activism, which meant that the revolution should be ‘self-limiting’ and rather a revolution of consciousness (Havel, 1992).

Although after the fall of communism civic activism experienced a sharp decline throughout Eastern Europe (Lomax, 1997), the heritage of the communist period still influences how civil society is understood today (Rikmann & Keedus, 2013; Brannan, 2003). Rein Ruutsoo (2012) identifies three discourses that shaped Estonian civic culture after Estonia regained independence: corporate statist, participatory and neoliberal third sector discourse. During the consolidation of the civil society, which included the development of an official ‘Development Concept of Estonian Civil Society’ (EKAK) in 2003, the prevailing understanding of civil society remained neoliberal and apolitical (Ruutsoo 2012). This means that participatory culture was underdeveloped and also largely opposed by the political elite. Rather, participation was tolerated through political parties. Civic activism and the representation of interests (especially by the Russian-speaking minority) were generally framed not as an attempt for democratic participation but rather as a threat to state order (Vetik, 2012). Yet, this does not mean that civil society in Estonia suffered the alleged weakness, but rather that it was struggling for political relevance (Ruutsoo, 2012; Rikmann & Keedus, 2013).

Against this background, the post-economic crisis civil unrest of 2011 had a potential for strong resonance in Estonia. Although the economic inequalities were perhaps the primal motivator of the international protest movements (Occupy, Indignados, Anonymous), in political terms they vocalised an anti-elitist message. Institutional politics and representation was seen as inadequate for democracy instead of direct participation and grassroots government (Chou, 2015; Lorey, 2014). In theoretical terms, the protest movement advocated for sub-politics and sub-activism to be given priority over institutional politics. However, no notable Occupy movement erupted in Estonia. Instead, politicisation of the copyright issue in conjunction with the ACTA treaty in 2011 converged with the

general dissatisfaction with the government's elitist secrecy, corporate power and coercion. This kind of convergence was noted in several European countries (Matthews & Žikovska, 2013) and elsewhere (Haggart, 2014). In Estonia the prime minister publicly ridiculed anti-ACTA sentiments and suggested that people wear 'tin-foil hats for protection against such crazy ideas' (Stop ACTA! 2012), which helped to mobilise protest. Therefore, the demonstrations of 2011 in Estonia were equally anti-ACTA and anti-government.

One of the organisations behind the anti-ACTA protests internationally was the Pirate Party, an organisation that is currently present in 42 countries. Their presence was noted publicly for the first time in conjunction with the anti-ACTA demonstrations also in Estonia (Kõiv, 2013), although the publicly known organiser was the Estonian Internet Society. The scope of the aims and slogans of the organisations in different countries varies from strictly copyright-related issues to a wider range of political agendas, including legalising marijuana and free transport (Erlingsson & Persson, 2011; Meza, 2011). What is common is that their ideology and repertoire has been understood as sub-activism because of the ways they promote online participation in politics (Prinzing, 2012; Litvinenko, 2012; Li, 2009). It has been argued that they have been partly successful in changing the discourse of politics in this regard in some regions, at least towards a more elaborate use of online possibilities in politics (Jungherr, Jürgens & Schoen, 2012). There has been no analysis of the role or repertoire of the Pirate Party or other internet activists in Estonia.

Analysing the civil protest around the year 2011 can shed light on the connections between and rationale behind different forms of civil activism and participation repertoires. The remainder of the paper focuses on young people who had the motivation and opportunity to navigate between the conflicting discourses that were made visible in conjunction with the anti-ACTA protest.

## Case selection, methods and data

The empirical part of this paper relies on ethnographic fieldwork conducted as part of the MYPLACE 7<sup>th</sup> framework project. This pan-European project explores how young people's social participation is shaped by the shadows (past, present and future) of totalitarianism and populism in Europe. As one part of the project, researchers in each country were encouraged to locate and analyse cases of youth participation. The case of Estonian internet activists was selected as one due to its salience in the public sphere and relative novelty in terms of repertoires and causes. Internet-related issues have not caused any notable outbursts of activism yet, while one of the demonstrations organised by internet activists in 2011 was possibly the largest demonstration in Estonia since mass rallies during the process of regaining independence in late 1980s and early 1990s.

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted following MYPLACE guidelines.<sup>2</sup> Data consisted of in-depth interviews (n=15) with members of Estonian internet activists that have organised around two NGOs: the Estonian Internet Society (EIK) and the Estonian Pirate Party (PP), ethnographic notes taken at meetings and events of the activists, transcripts of offline and online conversations and material from their websites. The fieldwork was conducted between September 2011 and November 2013. Since these years were characterised by intense and varying activities by the two groups, the pool of interviewees as well as the range of questions asked shifted in the fieldwork process. Notably, although the initial case included only the Pirate Party, in the course of the fieldwork it became clear that the two organisations should not be analysed separately for three main reasons. First, 7 members of PP were also members of EIK. Second, PP and EIK in their daily practices communicated, commented on and reflected each other often. Third, because the activities of the two overlapping groups were reflective, comparison of two organisations offers a more thorough overview of the different paths of perceptions and repertoires of activists.

<sup>2</sup> Guidelines available at MYPLACE website <http://www.fp7-MYPLACE.eu>

As a researcher, I assumed an open, reflective stance towards my informants. I was clear about the aims of my project and all or most of the people with whom I was in touch over the years acknowledged the reason of my presence or inquiries. Because for most of the interviewees transparency was one of the principles they were fighting for, I experienced no difficulties in discussing any matters in which I was interested. Rather, I often felt that my attention towards the groups was welcome as it increased the relevance of their activism. During interviews I often reflected about my generalisations based on what I was told. Therefore, it seemed that the process of fieldwork was stimulating and pleasant for both sides.

Audio interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo computer software. The material was then descriptively analysed for the MYPLACE project purposes. The data report formed the basis for further analysis presented in this paper using thematic analysis methods (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). During the process of both initial descriptive and later more thorough analysis, several follow-up questions were asked and answered by the informants during informal meetings, via telephone or Facebook chat. The aim of the analysis was to combine emic and etic point of views (Agar, 1986) in order to create a fuller understanding of the activists' subjective understanding and the context in which this takes place.

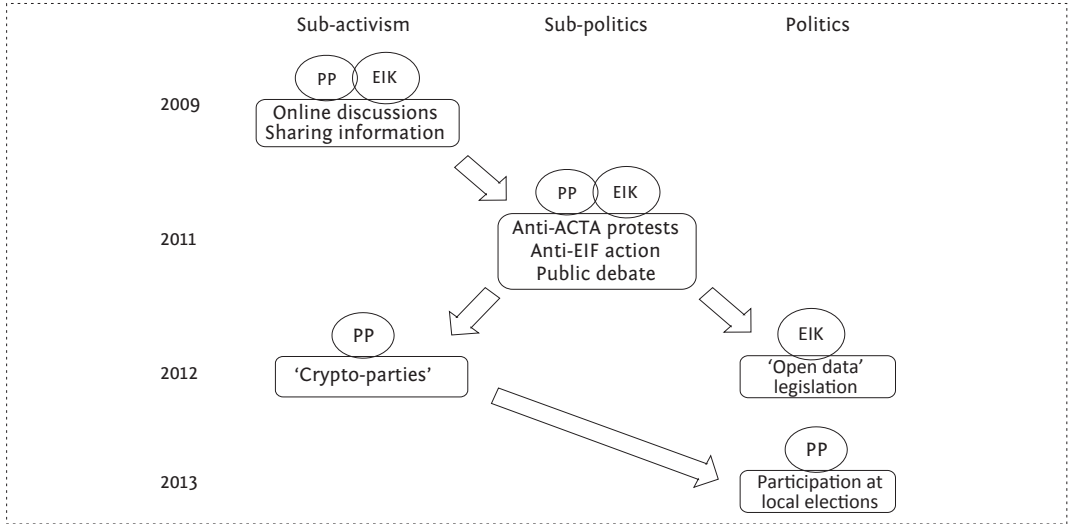
## Repertoires of EIK and PP

An overview of the repertoire of action of Estonian internet activists and the two organisations they revolve around is summarised in Figure 1. This shows how at different times activists relied on different repertoires of action on different 'levels' of politics.

In regard to their development, the EIK and the PP were founded within a couple of months of each other in 2009. It is also worth noting that both organisations stemmed from online discussions. The founders of PP were 4 young men in their 20s, studying at Tartu University and working in IT, most of them in the same small software development company. EIK was founded as a result of online discussion of roughly 20 IT-related people on the topic of planned 'domain reform' by the Estonian Internet Foundation (EIF) aimed at increasing the cost of hosting web sites. During the first year, PP remained largely dormant and their repertoire was limited to sending information about the internet and especially piracy-related material to their mailing list. Thus, the foundation of both organisations can be seen in sub-activism.

In 2010 the repertoire of Estonian internet activist changed towards more public and visible sub-politics. Although a public debate about the planned domain reform erupted already in late 2010 due to a public letter by EIK, notable change happened in early 2011 as internet activism gained momentum in Europe and the rest of the world due to the planned ACTA treaty. Both EIK and PP were involved in organising anti-ACTA demonstrations and their symbols were visible in the two biggest Estonian cities (EIK had major role in Tallinn while PP was behind the demonstrations in Tartu). Although EIK and PP shared both people and goals until 2012, these organisations diverged during the aftermath of the anti-ACTA demonstrations. The repertoire of EIK thereafter moved closer to the institutional politics, while PP, on the other hand, retained a distinctly sub-activist repertoire. EIK was publicly known as the organiser of the demonstrations and their leader was involved in consultations with political parties. After the ACTA treaty was rejected, from early 2012 members of the EIK had frequent meetings with politicians and administrators revolving around the Public Data Act and its implementation, which was current at that time.

PP had organised educational events called 'crypto parties' for internet security since 2011, where protection against government data collection was taught. A crypto-party is an international grassroots endeavour to introduce various ways of protecting one's privacy on the internet. At a crypto-party, a group of people (20-40 people) gather together with their computers and learn ways to encrypt their



**Figure 1:** Repertoires of activism of EIK and PP  
Source: author’s compilation

e-mails, protect computers from viruses and online data collection (referred to as ‘spying’). Parallel to that it maintained an online discussion about democracy and internet-related issues among its members and supporters. Both of these activities fall into the category of sub-activism because of their attention to the lifestyle and everyday behaviour rather than cause-oriented public activism. However, PP was further marginalised in early 2013 as one of the members of the PP was involved in two public scandals. First, he stole a computer from the Parliament building during a guided tour in order to ‘inspect possible fraud with the electronic elections’ and was arrested but later released by the police. Also, the same member visited the annual Independence Day reception of the President of the Republic and refused to shake hands with the First Lady. Both of these incidents were widely publicised in the media and the PP was ridiculed. Due to scandals, two members of the board of PP withdrew their membership, yet remained members of EIK. Roughly at the same time, EIK, on the other hand, was given the title ‘NGO of the year’ by the Union of Estonian NGOs because of successful demonstrations and involvement in the preparation of the Public Data Act.

Nevertheless, in 2013 at the local elections the PP was one of the organisers of the electoral list Vabakund in Tartu. This list included greens, university staff, and some former members of social democrats, and it carried grassroots-politics slogans. Members of PP advocated for developing online information sharing and participation possibilities of the city administration. The list gained 3 seats in the city council and the leader of PP, who was number 4 on the list, remained the advisor for the counsellors. EIK distanced itself from elections and claiming to be an apolitical organisation, although at the last moment the leader of EIK set up its candidature in an electoral list in Tallinn without much success.

Participation at the local elections fits in the most institutionalised slot of politics. However, throughout the elections the PP and the electoral list Vabakund carried a distinctly apolitical message, contrasting itself to professional politics and politicians. Interestingly, while the EIK was involved in the preparation of the Public Data Act it also publicly stressed its apolitical nature. We shall now look more closely at the rhetoric of the activists in order to understand the discourses behind the ‘politics’ in these statements.

## Activists' rhetoric concerning the internet, activism and politics

### Views on the internet

The internet and its possibilities and regulations are the 'locus of conflict' (Bakardjieva, 2009) that mobilised people into PP and EIK. However, internet participation can be conceptualised in various ways (see, for example, Lindgren & Linde, 2012). On the most basic level, both members of EIK and PP see the internet as simply a means of communication that the IT-literate generation uses for effortless communication both within the organisations and in communicating with the public. Both organisations extensively use different chat rooms for everyday discussions, posting news, etc. For example, a chat room was used to decide how to react to PP member's controversial action, while in the EIK a chat room was used to formulate a public letter to Estonian members of the European Parliament on ACTA issues. In addition, the PP and the EIK send out newsletters, tweets and host websites to promote their activities and draw attention to issues. For example, members of both the EIK and the PP helped to facilitate internet communication during anti-ACTA demonstrations.

The internet can also be seen as part of the political agenda of the PP and the EIK. The way in which members of both organisations understand the internet guides them to different repertoires of activism. EIK was mobilised around the topic of how the internet is managed legally and economically. Their discussions range from the use of open source software in government-run IT systems and the issue of 'net neutrality' to the affordability of internet domains. PP shared information about online piracy and internet security.

*We were communicating in Skype chat, more and more people joined in. Most of the current issues [concerning the domain reform] were discussed with that group, and so this eventually became the Estonian Internet Society. I was more active at the beginning, I was writing posts [in Facebook] and kept the blog. (Jüri, former member of board of PP, current member of EIK, individual interview)*

Compared to EIK, the ideology of PP goes further than that. The PP focuses on the way in which the internet as such and its network-model can be used to develop democracy in general. The internet is seen as the means of achieving the ideal of open, horizontal and consensual politics. Usually they refer to this new type of democracy as 'liquid democracy' or 'delegative democracy',<sup>3</sup> and some kind of software solution is required to implement these models.

*Intuitively, this should be the thing in which everyone who knows something is able to participate. My background is that in addition to philosophy I deal with software projects. Basically, these projects are like the Pirate Party or like Anonymous, which are also these kinds of organisations without borders. There are a number of members, but at the same time there are a number of interested people who just hang out at our chat room, sometimes they blabber about something, sometimes they don't do anything, sometimes they have a good idea. And so the projects are like this too, there are full-time code developers. But at the same time, the code is public, everyone can offer solutions for this code... envision the governing of the state as happening in the same way as the software projects, sort of a meritocracy. Everything is public, which means that everyone can take the same code and make something out of it, which grants the meritocracy, so that everyone... can get access to the power. (Mikk, leader of PP, individual interview)*

<sup>3</sup> Liquid or delegative democracy is a form of democratic control whereby voting power is vested in delegates, rather than representatives. This term is a generic description of either already existing or proposed popular control apparatuses. The Pirate Parties in Germany, Italy, Austria, Norway, France and the Netherlands use versions of this model through some kind of software platform.



As an example of this kind of delegative democracy, members of PP often point to the software platform implemented for internal communication by the German PP (Litvinenko, 2009). At the same time, knowing that the German example did not work well, activists said they needed to find simpler solutions and, at the same time, educate people in using these platforms. During and after the elections some members were placing these hopes on an online platform developed with the city council. This platform was supposed to make public the everyday bureaucracy and the policy papers being developed in the city council, where three of the members of the electoral list were now in office.

*In Tartu we [the Pirate Party] are working on directing more decisions of the city government towards public discussion. . . . I'm now working on getting this kind of system going. It is rather easy to create a system so that more important stuff that the city government is about to decide... that these things go for a poll or a discussion before that. But there is always a problem with e-democracy that we have to deal with . . . not only us, but the whole society has to deal with. In order to make it work, we need to educate the public on how to make decisions that influence a broader public, not just his or her own self. How to decide so that you are not seeing things just from the top of your own hill? I don't know, like, government ethics or whatever. But we need to draw up guidelines for that with sociologists or philosophers of the ethics centre. Some kind of general course that people have to take in order to understand what problems have to be taken into consideration. Because people are generally good willed and want to know and are ready to consider others if they are informed of the problems. (Rein, member of PP and EIK, individual interview)*

Referrals to the 'ethics centre' that Rein is talking about in this quote point to a member of an electoral list who works at the local university. The fact that she was a professor of ethics is not a coincidence. Members of PP criticised the mainstream politics from the ethical and moral standpoint and vocalised the need to show an example with the action of their organisation. The focus on ethics was noticed in post-economic crisis protests in other countries (Chou, 2015; Lorey, 2014) as well as in Estonia in general, where a series of protests under the slogan 'Enough of Lying Politics' took place in 2013. Differently from other Western countries though, the ethical side of the protests reflects the self-limiting revolution ethos of the civil activism in Eastern Europe prior to regaining independence, which also stressed that the real revolution is intrinsic rather than institutional (Havel, 1992). This ethical politics cannot be simply oppressed from above but people have to be educated and convinced into it. Therefore, there is no real use of institutional politics but the repertoire has to remain close to the life-world. This understanding may also be seen behind the choice of 'crypto parties' as a means of educating people about the online security issues.

## Views on activism

Connected to the perception of the role of the internet, the views on activism differ among the members of PP and EIK. It could be said that the identities that PP generates through being a 'pirate' is broader and engulfs more aspects of lifestyle than the identity as a member of Estonian Internet Society. In the following excerpt, a member of the PP compares the difference between the PP and mainstream political parties with the difference between monotheistic religions and 'Eastern philosophy'. What is stressed in the interviews is that a pirate is not following a major goal but is practicing a way of thinking.

**Interviewer:** *What does it mean to be a pirate?*

**Rein, member of PP and EIK, individual interview:** *Basically, I'm just doing the same things I've always done. I was dealing with these things before I joined the Pirate Party. I joined... like a club of people with similar interests. This is a club. I'm doing these things anyway. Of course, the name 'party' is not quite*

*right. It is like a movement, moving towards something. The Pirate Wheel<sup>4</sup> shows the variety of goals. The difference is like between monotheistic religions and Eastern philosophy. Like there are different gods and this is more like a way of life and way of thinking.*

For the PP, being a pirate is understood as an identity and as a lifestyle. This way of life means thinking and acting in the realm of IT, which means having wide knowledge of and practicing IT: programming, software, online piracy, rules of conduct in Internet chat rooms, etc. Therefore, 'crypto parties' were a suitable form of activism during and after anti-ACTA demonstrations as it targeted the everyday life online.

In contrast, the activism by the EIK falls into a more traditional understanding of lobbying. Members of the EIK describe how it deals with pressurising legislators, participating in policy discussions and publishing articles in the media. The members of the EIK stress that their aim is 'getting things done', while the leader of the EIK criticises other more idealistic aims. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with an activist, whose interests fall beyond the EIK. Although he describes how his main aim is to 'organise things', he also names other 'projects' that he is interested in:

**Interviewer:** *How are you connected to this – I would call it internet activism? I don't know if you agree with this term?*

**Samuel, member of EIK, individual interview:** *Well, it's as good as any. How I am connected is that I interact with different people in the EIK, I manage projects. I also interact with people involved with 'Enough of Lying Politics' and activists in general who are not connected with the problems of the internet. And as I would describe it, my role is to raise an issue, I try to talk about a problem, find people who think the same way and try to create hype of some sort, like to describe a future that is better. And then you try to find people who would help with organising or anything else practical. Because I can't develop software or write a draft for legislation all that I do is talk. I talk to people about problems, problems that I care about. And then try to find ways to get things resolved in a way that I think is best.*

Since the EIK and the PP see the role of the internet differently, their ideas on the appropriate type of activism also differ. Thus, while the activism advocated by the EIK falls under a more traditional understanding of lobbying and, therefore, forms a part of 'sub-politics' that, when given an opportunity, enters the institutional politics, the PP, on the other hand, as I would phrase it, forms the political peak of the iceberg of sub-activism.

The scandal that erupted around a member of PP triggered a heated debate about the acceptable methods of activism in PP and EIK. This indicates the border between what was understood and civil and uncivil activism (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, 2010; Banaji, Buckingham, Van Zoonen & Hirzalla, 2009). Some activists distanced themselves immediately from PP because they believed stealing a computer and behaving rudely with the President's wife is unacceptable. Others, on the other hand, stressed that these acts were to be framed as civil disobedience representing civic courage and good citizenship. One of the questions was whether to expel the activist from PP because of the bad publicity. The following quote is taken from a speech held by a member of PP at the general meeting of PP after the scandal broke.

*I would like to see the action by Mihkel as an example of civic courage or activism, which did not go well because he was verging on the edges of the Penal Code, although this was unintentional and he had wanted to remain at the level of just discussing these things. I think that in the future people have to think more clearly about what they protest against and with what means, but this is a good example of how there has to be more civic courage in society. Many of us don't want to get involved in anything.*

4 A Pirate Wheel is a chart of the goals and ideologies of the Pirate Party International that is distributed and translated by its national members.

*Many of our problems arise from the fact that people are so passive and they don't care about anything and they don't want to get involved. Although they have all the democratic rights... .we should treat it as a manifestation of civic courage gone wrong.* (Elen, member of PP, field recording)

This conflict can be seen as an attempt by some activists (mostly aligned with PP) to reverse the symbolic order (Melucci, 1996) of what is tolerated as activism and what is not. In this case, the norms of property were more relevant to some activists, while others saw the politicisation of the act of stealing as sufficient justification. The debate lasted for several weeks until the culprit himself publicly stated that he has stopped his membership at the PP. As a result of these incidents, two members of the board of the PP criticised the leader for not immediately condemning this unconventional action and also terminated their PP membership. The leader of PP justified the debates with the need to arrive at a consensus with every important decision in a political organisation, contrasting the choice of action stemming from ethical considerations to the 'backroom politics' and 'political correctness' of existing political parties.

### Views on politics

The tolerated repertoires of activism as well as the ways in which an organisation should arrive at decisions are both reflected by the ideas of what 'politics' means for different activists. While the leader of the EIK constantly stresses that the EIK is an 'apolitical organisation', there are members of the EIK who also say that because it is involved in policymaking, it is political nevertheless. In the leader's vision, which is widely shared, 'the political' is understood as something done by political parties in the sphere where new norms and values are created, while 'apolitical' is the technical implementation or advocacy of such norms. In the following quote, a former member of the board of PP explains that he left the organisation because he felt that PP was too 'political'.

*Interviewer: What makes the EIK better than the PP for you?*

*Jüri, former member of board of PP, current member of EIK, individual interview: In one case, we're dealing with a political organisation, where you have all kinds of agendas . . . Well, the Pirate Party, anything to do with legalising stuff, or things that are not discussed in society and sort of go against the norms. But stuff that the EIK deals with, like information security and privacy, these are generally like... things get done. EIK fights for the implementation of some things. In short, in one case we have a protest action – that is EIK. But in the other case, they take systems that are working perfectly well and try to break them and remake them.*

At the same time, common knowledge of the PP stresses that, although it is a political organisation, the kind of politics the PP advocates for both in their activism and in the electoral list Vabakund is 'apolitical'. This means that in collective decisions, little coercive power is exercised and decisions are achieved through deliberation facilitated by technological means. Members of the PP stress that their politics is more inclusive and that different ideologies can eventually achieve a consensus. The lengthy discussion following the scandal described above is an example of this meticulous use of consensus. These discussions, often on controversial ideas such as racism, were frequent in PP and in the electoral list Vabakund's everyday practices. Another example of aiming at consensus is the fact that the leader of the PP has tried (and sometimes succeeded) to become a member of different political parties (liberals, social democrats, etc.) simultaneously. He says that his aim is to 'demolish the political paranoia' a little bit.

In tune with 'apolitical' politics of PP is their focus on local elections rather than state level politics. Although eventually the leader of PP did run for the council, in the beginning he was reluctant because he felt this would set him on the same level with the other parties who try to gain seats by

propaganda or coercion. Following a similar logic, some members of Vabakund were discouraging any advertisement for Vabakund because an electoral list should, in their views, remain only informative through a website and perhaps a flier rather than engaging in PR. Although this may also reflect the fact that the electoral list lacked resources for having considerable advertisement, it falls in line with the idea of people having to be educated in order to make better informed decisions. Instead, several members of Vabakund participated in some small demonstrations in Tartu during the electoral campaign (e.g., against the development of the bus station area that would benefit private investors). Therefore, it is difficult to place PP's participation in local elections under either the sub-activist or institutional political category. Also, the claims that EIK is an apolitical organisation remain unconvincing because of their direct engagement with legislation.

## Conclusion

The case of Estonian internet activists indeed presents us a variety of repertoires of political activism. One of the main questions that I posed in the beginning of the paper was why did they choose one or another repertoire? Looking at the internal and external influences, I have tried to show how the choice between these repertoires is influenced by both the historical context of Eastern European apolitical activism and the ideological rhetoric of social movement activists. Looking at the views of activists as internal factors, we can see that both the Estonian Internet Society and the Pirate Party hold free internet as an important part of modern life. While there are several issues on which the EIK and PP agree, such as the use of 'open source' software, 'net neutrality', protection of personal data, etc., what differs between the two groups is the answer to the question by what means should the common aim of liberal internet politics be achieved.

In choosing the repertoire, PP opposes itself to the existing public vision of how 'politics works' in political parties, i.e., through 'backroom decisions', strict hierarchical lines of command, and closeness to non-favourable opinions. Instead, they stress the need for ethical politics. In this regard, they align with several other modern social movements such as the environmental, communitarian or spiritual movements, where ethics is one of the central concerns (Melucci, 1996). The repertoire of PP is aimed at influencing people's lives directly through sub-activism and to present an alternative to unethical politicians by setting up their candidature at the local elections. EIK, on the other hand, chooses a repertoire that in their vision is more effective in order to influence policies. It uses activist repertoires (demonstrations, public debate) but instead of trying to influence people's everyday lives they rely on co-operation with institutional politics (participation at the writing of legislation).

Throughout these activities both members of PP and EIK often used the word 'political' in order to position themselves either within or without it, to describe various activities or to discuss what is the term's proper use or practice. This becomes especially salient during the aftermath of the scandals around PP and during the local government elections. Some members of PP left because of 'too much politics', yet the members of PP claimed that they were 'less political' than other parties. What is interesting and important is not so much whether these claims are true or not but what are actually the discourses behind these claims. I suggest that the rationale behind the claims of both groups and, thus, the choice of activism repertoires stems from differences in what these people see as 'politics'. In the case of EIK, politics is the field of ideologies that are carried by political parties and governing bodies. In a way they reflect the narrow, institutional understanding of politics that Hay (2007) points out is widely accepted among politicians and theorists. In EIK's view, because of the mechanisms of politics the politicians often don't know what is going on in the 'real world' of the internet and EIK has to offer technical knowledge that they possess. In the PP case, however, what the activists have to offer is not just technical opinions but a critique of the mechanisms of politics. The most salient question lies in the way decisions are arrived at and the involvement of people that, in their view, is

**Table 2:** Discourses of politics of EIK and PP

	Estonian Internet Society	Pirate Party
Politics is...	Field of ideologies	Field of coercion
Therefore the decisions often are...	Not reasonable enough	Not legitimate enough
Solution offered...	More know-how	More deliberation

Source: author's compilation

connected to ethics. The mechanisms of politics must succumb to these considerations, something that the PP is willing to do and set an example of. In Table 3 I have tried to summarise how the PP and the EIK see 'politics' (see Table 2).

Therefore, we can see that the repertoires of action of the two groups were chosen in correspondence with their understanding of politics. Educating people through events and online platforms was seen as more important for PP than offering technical know-how during negotiations with the legislators. Since members of EIK were concerned about the efficiency of their action that was influenced by their public image, condemned some of the repertoire of PP as uncivil, and distanced them from it because this would give them 'bad PR'.

Of course, we should be careful in attributing the choice of repertoire to internal influences alone. As Melucci (1996, p. 183) points out, the scope and possibilities of action are significantly influenced by constraints from the reaction of other actors in the process of social movement, most importantly politicians and public opinion. In the case of EIK, we see how in 2011-2012 they successfully used the 'opening of a window' (Cornforth, Hayes & Vangen, 2015; Zohlnhöfer, Herweg & Rüb, 2015) for making a change in public policies regarding the 'Open data' legislation. This time was characterised by the public opinion strongly against the politicians and the anti-ACTA sentiment well spread in the EU. Thus, the participation of EIK in institutional politics probably would not have been possible under other circumstances and at other times.

Also, looking at the broader picture, the historical context of Eastern European 'apolitical' civil activism and the understanding of civil society in general (Rikmann & Keedus, 2013; Brannan, 2003) influenced the rhetoric and repertoires of Internet activists. While EIK followed the mainstream understanding and stressed that the role of an activist group is merely to give technical know-how and not be involved in 'politics', the repertoire and rhetoric of PP took an alternative route and aimed at (re-)politicising private, lifestyle choices and identities. While the ethics of politics was in the core of the post-economic crisis protest internationally (Chou, 2015; Lorey, 2014), I suggest that the PP attempts had moderate success at least partly because of the over-politicisation on everyday life that was experience under the regime of Soviet Union. Also, 'a pirate' may be an identity with a threshold that is too high to have universal or widespread resonance. While it is true that pirates internationally are trying to redefine online piracy as not theft but as spreading information (Castells & Cardoso, 2013), the public opinion in Estonia did not shift in favour of it, especially when similar attempts were translated into real life action (the direct action by a member of PP including theft in 2012). Rather, this created a remarkable cleavage between the activists of EIK and PP. Thus, the attempt to redefine the symbolic order regarding activism or political participation (Melucci, 1996, p. 357) in the PP case proved to be perhaps too radical.

However, as I mentioned, we see that the focus on ethics by social movements is not limited to Pirate Parties alone but is at the core of environmentalist, anti-capitalist, and other movements worldwide (Melucci, 1997). Inevitably, these movements deal with and aim at the everyday choices of people rather than political institutions alone, and they often rely on alternative repertoires of action. It has been argued that if attempts to influence public choices or participate in them remain only in the life-world, they will be politically ineffective and, therefore, perhaps do not even qualify as politics after all (Kips, 2012). Yet if we consider the sub-activism repertoire as part of the everyday life, then this is inevitably closer to people than institutional politics. In the case presented in this paper,

the sub-activist repertoire consisted also of educational projects that may perhaps change the life of the participants more than new legislation. Furthermore, if the goals of EIK and PP are similar then perhaps the fact that PP was described in the public as more radical helped to set the stage for more moderate demands of EIK? Finally, Hay (2007) makes a valid point that attributing unethical conduct to politicians is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this regard, the attempts of Pirates may be perhaps naïve or controversial but they aim at the right direction of bringing ethics back to politics.

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**Appendix 1: Informants**

Pseuonym		Educational status	Employment status	Family status	Residential status	Relationship to organisations
Mikk	M35	Higher (philosophy)	Self-employed, half-time	Living with partner and with children	Living with partner and children	Leader of PP, member of EIK
Eerik	M27	Unfinished higher (IT)	Self-employed	Single	Living alone	Founding member and leader of EIK
Jüri	M30	Vocational (security worker), unfinished higher (IT)	Full-time	Single	Living alone	Founding member of EIK, former member of board of PP
Jaana	F25	Vocational (secretary)	Full-time	Single	Living alone	Member of board of PP
Oliver	M47	Higher (mathematics), unfinished higher (political science)	Full-time	Single	Living alone	Member of EIK, former member of board of PP
Eduard	M23	Unfinished higher (medicine, social sciences)	Student/self-employed	In a relationship	Lives with spouse	Member of EIK, member of board of PP
Rein	M37	Higher (graphic design)	Full-time	Married and with children	Living with wife and children	Founding member of EIK, member of PP
Mihkel	M33	Unfinished higher (semiotics)	Self-employed	Single	Living alone	Member of PP
Elen	F53	Higher (drama)	Self-employed	Single	Living alone	Member of PP
Heldur	M20	Unfinished higher (industrial design)	Student/self-employed	Single	Living alone	Member of EIK, member of PP
Samuel	M29	Unfinished higher (history)	Self-employed	Single	Living along	Member of EIK
Martin	M22	Vocational (construction)	Self-employed	In a relationship	Living alone	Member of PP
Saul	M37	Higher (IT)	Full-time	Single	Living alone	Supporter of PP, member of electoral list Vabakund
Maik	M47	Higher (physics)	Full-time	Married and with children	Living with wife and children	Supporter of PP, member of electoral list Vabakund
Asko	M40	Higher (philology)	Full-time	Separated	Living alone	Supporter of EIK

Source: author's compilation