

Citizenship, Activism and Mobilization: Internet Politics in Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria

In this issue of *Euxeinos* we offer readers three analyses of internet politics in the region of Southeast Europe. Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria were not bypassed by the seismic movements in internet use seen in recent years in a number of countries across the world, which have brought about significant changes in the balance of forces between politics and civil society. Everywhere – from the Middle East, the site of the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011, to the Occupy Wall Street movement to the large-scale protests against Vladimir Putin’s policies in Russia at the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012 – we are witnessing the usage of the same social tools online: blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the local Web 2.0 equivalents. Mobile phones, in turn, have helped reshape but also unify the communication landscape by integrating multiple functions in a single device and by providing direct internet access.

At the same time, however, the forms of activism and protest culture vary just as much as their geography. Behind the ‘internet and politics’ label one will often find quite different developments, interests and actors. This is especially evident in countries like Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria, which are neighbors, and in many ways similar. They share common cultural codes, but that also have different histories, different political and civic traditions. That is why the concrete practices of online activism and mobilization produce both identical effects and effects that are specific to the different countries. The expectations everywhere are that net politics will give an impetus to the democratization of the virtual public sphere and civil society and encourage productive debates on key issues on the agenda of the respective countries. But the developments are not always unambiguous and the flourishing of online social media can serve quite different, sometimes controversial ends.

Penelope Papailias analyzes the alternative forms of independent reporting on the internet which are developing in the context of the Greek debt ‘crisis’ of 2010 and 2011. Papailias’s article ‘Reporting as an Act of Citizenship: The Net, the News and the Greek “Crisis”’ takes as its starting point the idea that the ‘crisis’ is a media event, but placed in a context in which confidence in the traditional media has been largely discredited. Papailias carefully analyzes the reasons for the ‘bankruptcy’ of the mass media systems and the ways it encourages the flourishing of citizen journalism. As the author notes, it would be too lopsided to assume that digital reporting is merely an alternative to mainstream media discourse and a means of producing a counter-narrative. Tracing the historical development and concrete recent instances of citizen reporting in connection with the crisis (blogs, satire, re-composing the original media content, producing narratives and archives, and so on), Papailias convincingly demonstrates that the fundamental change is in the very ways events have begun to be represented and perceived. Citizen journalism is much closer to the scene of the action, to street protests, and focusses on the very act of witnessing. The policy of witnessing is also increasing the responsibility of citizen journalists. As a result of this important change in the distance from the event, digital reporting is gradually turning into an act of engaged citizenship capable of encouraging and re-imagining politics itself.

Asli Tunç, for her part, examines the developments that have led to the growing importance of the political uses of the internet in Turkey. Tunç’s article, ‘Against the Wind: Internet, Politics and Cyber Activism in Turkey’, clearly reminds us that the possibilities for using social media and websites should not be taken for granted, as they often have to be fought for and won. In fact, in some cases

this holds not only for the internet in Turkey but also in Greece and Bulgaria as well as in many other countries. As Papailias points out, in the summer of 2011 the Greek government played with the idea of introducing legislation to ban anonymity on blogs (even though the proposal was not considered enforceable, it clearly indicates the panic in the system). Testament to a similar attempt to locate and monitor sources of discourse, as of June 1, 2012, Greek blogs hosted on Google can no longer use the .com domain, but are redirected to .gr. At different times, attempts have been made to control and restrict internet service providers (ISPs) in Bulgaria, too. As Manuel Castells notes, 'Control of communication and information has always been the source of power, and the internet opens up greater possibilities for independent communication - something that no government likes.'¹ Tunç traces retrospectively all major restrictions imposed by law on the internet in Turkey in recent years (the blocking of YouTube between 2008 and 2010, the filtering of content by various criteria, the blocking of access to some 15 000 websites, and so on). One of the important problems analyzed by Tunç is that cyber activism rarely receives sufficient coverage in the traditional media, or when it does, the focus is not on the mobilizing potential of social networks but rather on the issue that spurred cyber activists into action. Despite this, in Turkey (as in many other countries) the imposition of restrictions on the internet has mobilized a number of non-governmental organizations and cyber activists to protest against net censorship. Since 2010, these online protests have spilled over onto the streets of Istanbul.

1 Castells, Manuel (2004): 'Izpitvam moralnoto zadalzhnie da kazvam kakvoto znaya. Interviu na Orlin Spassov s prof. Manuel Kastels' ("I Feel It Is My Moral Duty to Say What I Know." An Interview with Prof. Manuel Castells by Orlin Spassov'), *Sotsiologicheski problemi*, 3-4: 259.

In Bulgaria, too, the world of politics has changed quickly in recent years, becoming more dependent on the new technologies. One of the important questions is to what extent practices related to the social internet can stimulate political and citizen activism. The answer is not always self-evident as various nationalist and other radical groups that preach xenophobia and racism also profit from social networks, where they have a strong following. There are two distinct driving forces: the entry of traditional political structures into the internet and activism 'from below'. The analysis of the performance of political parties in the last two election campaigns, in 2009 and 2011, shows that the use of the internet is often more façade-like rather than genuinely contributing to communication with voters. Moreover, parties that invest less funds and efforts in online campaigns usually do better in elections. Thus, the traditional media remain dominant in shaping voters' attitudes. At the same time, mobilizations in the field of civil society are often driven less by ideal than by pragmatic motives. Thus, at the end of the day, protest and the desire to be alternative can now be easily practiced on the internet without civic engagement.

This issue of *Euxeinos* appears at an important moment, where we need to take stock of the possibilities of social media for political and citizen mobilization. There is no doubt that many aspects of politics and citizen activism are increasingly going digital. Democratizing changes, though, are not guaranteed by the very fact of access to the internet and information and communication technologies. People remain the key factor, because it is their policies, wishes and choices that ultimately determine for what and how the internet is used.

Orlin Spassov
Guest Editor