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The European Patterns of Political Participation: Towards the Issue of Convergence*

The central question addressed in the paper is the question of convergence between European democracies, particularly between the old and the new ones concerning the patterns of political participation: are old and new European democracies converging as far as their patterns of political participation are concerned? What can be concluded from the existing characteristics and trends in various European democracies?

Though one certainly cannot simply equate participation and democracy, the issue of convergence in political participation is particularly relevant as far as participation is understood as a major dimension of democracy. Here, one may refer to Dahl's concept of the poliarchy, consisting of participation and competitiveness. Convergence or divergence between nations or groups of nations in the patterns of political participation may thus have significant implications for the democratic European governance from the local to the transnational level.

In this paper, political participation is understood in a very broad sense as any activity 'intended to affect the workings and outcomes in the political system' (Goel and Horton Smith 1980: 76). Even many activities that are usually called *social* participation may be understood as political, as far as they are intended to affect politics in the broadest possible sense, no matter whether they in fact take place in the 'classical' political organisations and movements or not.

Political participation may also be understood as a form of communication where citizens' actions communicate certain messages to certain 'addresses'. It may also be noted that this process is supposed to operate in both ways: the citizens should receive messages that enable them to perceive the situation, which enables them to judge whether, in which field, and in which direction to participate. They are supposed to be informed about the effects of their participation, which enables them to consider their further actions. Participation is thus inevitably connected with the available information and knowledge.

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Consequently, the mass media, formal and informal education and mass media play crucial roles.

1. The aspects of political participation

In order to understand the variety of patterns of political participation and to discuss whether they are converging at the European level, the following aspects should be taken into account

1. The existence of the formal channels that enable political participation is mostly related to the issue of the institutional convergence. It may be argued that convergence at this level has mostly been achieved in the old and most of the new European democracies. An important role in this processes has been played by the EU criteria that the new members and the candidate countries had to fulfil in order to approach the European integrations. Consequently, this issue shall not receive any further attention in this paper.
2. The actual efficiency of the channels required for political participation. This is a complex and multidimensional issue including both the efficiency of institutions as well as the self-organisational abilities and other competences of the citizens. Despite the relevance of the issue, it is also not discussed further in detail and, at least for the purposes of this paper and no indicators have been provided to measure it in a direct way.
3. The actually existing forms of political participation in a given society. This level will be the most central for our analysis. Consequently, we will also try to define these forms, operationalize and measure them.
4. The 'distribution' of political participation forms among the population. This implies the problems with inclusion and exclusion of various categories in the population. The relative exclusion from political participation of some categories is a well documented fact (relative exclusion of women, the less educated, the poor, etc.). The level of inclusion and exclusion should therefore be taken into account as well.
5. The meaning of political participation from the aspect of the participating citizens. It is questionable whether anything that *seems to be* political participation can in fact be one. There may be some clearly ritualistic practices that have nothing to do with intentions to have some impact on the operations of the political system. Consequently, it is not only relevant what people do but also what kind of meaning

they attribute to their actions. If one votes, for instance, while not believing in democracy, it could hardly be claimed that his or her voting can actually be a form of participation.

1.1. The forms of political participation

The forms of political participation may be divided into two categories: the direct adoption of binding decisions at various levels or influencing decisions. In the former case, a citizen uses – following the classical definitions of these concepts by Talcott Parsons – the medium of *power*, while in the latter he or she uses the medium of *influence* (see e.g. Parsons 1977). A typical example for the use of power is the participation at elections or at legally binding referenda. However, except the minority of citizens who actually take over public office, the chances for conventional power based participation are significantly limited because:

- the power used at the elections or referenda is extremely dispersed and the power of an individual voter is practically insignificant.
- it may only be used at very rare explicitly prescribed occasions (e.g every four or five years)
- it cannot be used in very sophisticated ways, since it is either used to authorise organisation or another person to make decisions in one's behalf (elections) or to chose between some very limited binary choices (referendum)

Consequently, citizens' use of influence is of considerable importance, since it enables much more sophisticated effects and can be practised on the everyday basis. It may be assumed that the growing complexity of the society even makes the power based forms of participation somewhat less relevant, while the relevance of influence based political participation is increasing. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the influence based political participation may be significantly more demanding, since it may require substantial investment of time and a variety of other resources, as well as significant knowledge and competence of the citizens.

The influence based participation may be divided again into two categories:

1. individual actions mostly of ad hoc nature that can be described as interactions; they only exist in a short run, they are intensive and directed toward a relatively concrete goal.
2. longer and mostly less intensive relations, mostly directed toward more general goals, can be described as membership in *associations* that may range from 'classical' political parties to the variety of social movements.

Though, the distinction between the two is far from clear, since membership in the organisation may also involve intensive interactions, and interactions may transform into organisations, one clearly cannot equate the two, because they are – at least in the analytical sense – distinct.

Political participation may also be divided into conventional and unconventional (see e.g. Goel and Smith 1980: 76–77). Although there is also a question of clear dividing lines, there are several arguments for this distinction. Concerning this issue, the following should be noted:

1. Even the most stable democracies do not guarantee the ability to solve all issues using the established institutions for (conventional) political participation.
2. The concept of participation should thus not be reduced only to what takes place in the established (formal) institutions and other forms should be taken into account as well (see: Goel in Smith 1980: 77-82). The presence of the various forms of public protest is not necessary the sign of deficit of participation opportunities. Instead, it may imply a very specific form of participation that may be – depending of its motives – significantly closer to the authentic care for public issues in Hannah Arendt's [1958] concept of *vita activa* than, for instance, the routine electoral participation.
3. The unconventional participation does not necessary deviate from the formal norms, since many of its forms ranging from political strikes to boycotts may be, under certain conditions, normatively acceptable and regulated. The distinction between legal and illegal participation should not be confused with the distinction between the unconventional and conventional participation. Obviously, the unconventional activities that involve the use of power or force (violent protest, uprising, terrorism) do deviate from formal norms. Unconventional actions may only be legal when they are influence based, but never when they are power based, since the use of power is legally quite clearly confined to well defined formal institutional processes (e.g. elections).

4. Though several aspects of unconventional participation are tolerated and formally regulated within the democratic systems, this type of participation still cannot be considered as 'established' form of participation. Instead it implies certain image of being extraordinary that still enables its distinction from the conventional forms of participation. (Makarovič 2002)

The described classification is presented in table 1. In practice, these forms are clearly intertwined with each other and they often depend of each other (Goel in Smith 1980: 80).

Table 1.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION		Conventional	Unconventional
Making power based binding decisions		Elections, referenda, holding public office	Uprising, revolution, terrorism ...
Influencing decision making	Interactions	Contacting politicians, persuading others...	Demonstrations, civil disobedience, boycotts, political strikes...
	Associations	Membership in political parties, pressure groups, NGOs	Membership in protest associations and movements

1.2. The Directions of Change?

Clearly, both old and new European democracies are subject to change concerning their participation patterns and this change is not necessarily a kind of normatively defined 'development'. Instead, it may even mean the divergence from some classical normative ideals of the wide and active participation. Here, one may especially mention the shift from 'secondary' to 'tertiary' associations (Wollebæk/Selle 2004, etc.) with the decreasing active membership and the decline in voting turnout in several Western democracies.

These trends may also reflect some older contradictions within the very concept of modernity. Representative democracy that includes (the right of equal) political

participation has been strongly related to the modernisation processes of the functional differentiation and specialisation (for a more recent contribution to this classical topic see systems theoretical approaches developed by Niklas Luhmann (e.g. 1990)). On the other hand, the very same growth of the societal structural-functional differentiation may make any authentic political participation increasingly complicated and hardly compatible with truly face-to-face and/or all-inclusive forms of political interactions. The institutions at the national and the trans-national level (e.g. the European commission), for instance, may be highly responsive for a wide variety of NGOs (Majone 1996; Richardson 1996), but only as far as the latter are able to apply quite sophisticated forms of communication with those institutions, provide a high level of expertise, operate within very complex sets of rules etc. These facts imply that when participating within the NGOs, the citizens normally have to rely on their professional activists, experts, even classical bureaucrats ('contracting out' the participation function may become necessary according to Maloney: 1999).

Moreover, voting is perhaps the most 'typical' form of political participation and, on the other hand, a very questionable one in terms of its factual relevance. Voting is one of the rare ways for the citizens to really adopt binding decisions (using power instead of just influence), it seems to be the most egalitarian and inclusive form of participation and it is a major source of political legitimacy. However, it may often be understood to be more of a ritual than a true decision making process; it may be relatively isolated from any social interaction, though it also may be encouraged by interactions; it seems to be based on some relatively simple (mostly class based) identities – making simple decisions between 'us' and 'them', which hardly correspond to the complex features such as the increasing class fragmentation (Dahrendorf (1959), Lipset etc.), individualisation within the risk society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and postmodernisation (Inglehart 1997). However, despite all of the problems, one may also hardly identify any viable alternatives to voting and general elections. Consequently, it may be argued that voting turnout remains one of the central features of participation within the democratic political systems.

Despite several seemingly universal trends of the late modernity, the empirical reality reveals a variety of patterns of political participation. Our task is to identify these patterns attempting to understand to what extent they support the convergence hypothesis.

2. Identifying patterns of political participation

To define the features that constitute the patterns of political participation on the societal (national) levels, one should not only take into account the citizens' actions but also the meanings they seem to attribute to them. What may seem to be the same behaviour may in fact be based on very different circumstances, motives in meanings. Voting, for instance, may be based on the voters' true desire to express her or his will, support a certain political option, participate in the decision making processes. On the other hand, it may be an aimless ritualistic behaviour based on habit (or simply obeying the law where voting is mandatory). The same amount of caution is required, for instance, when observing unconventional participation in the protest movements. Such participation may mean both the regrettable lack and/or inefficiency of formal/conventional channels of political participation. On the other hand it may imply the existence of highly active citizens engaged in a wide variety of participation forms.

Indicators of political participation within the European societies would thus take into account the dimensions based both on behaviour (the reported socio-political participation) and on some relevant values and attitudes.

The main source of survey data has been provided by the World/European Values Studies (esp. from 1990-3, 1995, 1999-2000). The main advantage of using these data is both the ability to analyse certain – though mostly short-term – trends and the ability to provide cross-national comparisons of the patterns of political participation. In addition, the more recent data from the European Social Survey and some other databases may be of use. The method chosen to perform this test at the most basic level is the hierarchical cluster analysis.¹ We have used the data from the last European Values Study (1999/2000), since this has been the last truly all-European social survey in this field that provides the standardised data required for our analysis.²

On the basis of some theoretical consideration and the available empirical data we have selected 10 different variables that may be used as proxy indicators for five different dimensions that characterise the major patterns of the political participation though 'political' should be understood here in a very broad sense, namely as any active concern for public issue:

¹ Using the squared Euclidean distances method and standardised z-scores of the selected variables.

² The European Social Survey data from 2002/2003 are more recent but they do not provide the data for several European countries (especially new democracies).

1) The attitudes towards participation, self-organisation and democracy (rejection of an authoritarian leader,³ rejection of the belief that democracies are not good for maintaining order, generalised trust, confidence in parliament). This four variables dimension is intended to measure the peoples' beliefs necessary to understand their actions and statuses.

2) The associations dimension consists of two summarised variables concerning (a) membership in political parties, local community actions, third world and human rights movements, environmental movements and peace movements and (b) the current non-paid work for the associations mentioned above as well as social welfare services, cultural activities, trade unions, professional associations, youth work, sports or recreation, women's groups and voluntary organisations concerned with health.⁴ Both variables have been constructed as the average numbers of associations per individual.

3) The voting dimension includes one variable measuring the country's average voters' turnout during the last 3 parliamentary elections.

4) The actions dimension consists of a single summarised variable indicating the actual participation (at least once) in the following actions: signing petitions, joining boycotts, attending lawfull demonstrations, joining unofficial strikes and occupying buildings or factories. The actions range from the most clearly conventional (signing petitions) to the most unconventional or even illegal but are nevertheless summarised in a single variable.

5) The inclusion dimension consists of the two variables indicating the level of inclusion/exclusion in/from political participation. The first is the proportion of women in parliament. The second is the proportion of people that would not vote, are not included in either way in political parties, local community actions, third world and human rights movements, environmental movements and peace movements, and have never participated in any of the actions specified above).

³ Support for democracy can be measured in the most adequate way, when democracy is confronted with an alternative or when a question suggests some problem with democracy.

⁴ The selection of associations may be a matter of discussion. Though all associations may be relevant, not all of them are equally relevant when we consider their concern for public issues. Sports, recreation and cultural clubs, for instance, are mostly intended to satisfy the needs of their members and are much less oriented towards the others. Moreover, the work-related protective interest groups, such as trade unions and professional associations, have also not been included within this dimension since they usually have very broad membership, but it is quite questionable what this membership in fact means. It may be based on 'privatised instrumentalism' in the sense of Lockwood and Goldthorpe that again means the lack of *public* concern. Or it may even be a result of inertia: in some new democracies, such as in Slovenia, many workers have simply formally reestablished the memberships in the trade union that developed from the old socialist trade union (with virtually mandatory membership). Consequently, only non-paid work in such organisations is taken into account, not membership.

Table 2: The indicators preview for EU member states and candidate countries

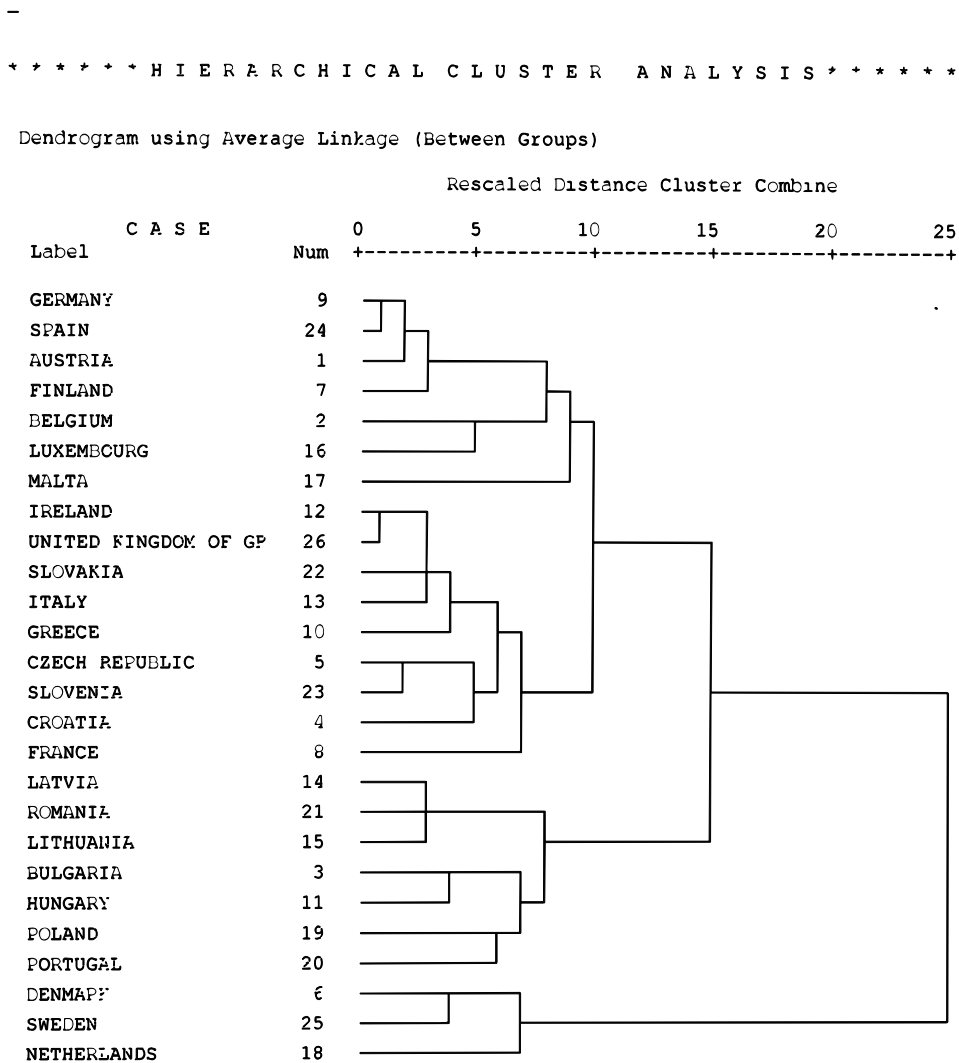
COUNTRY	ATTITUDES				ASSOCIATIONS		VOTING	INCLUSION/EXCLUSION		ACTIVATION	CLUSTER
	trust	parliamentary	strong leader	democracy	politics	all people	average	women	excluded	total activation	cluster
DENMARK	66,53	48,58	86,07	83,56	0,31	0,51	85,78	36,90	0,78	1,36	active
NETHERLANDS	60,08	54,38	72,77	78,86	0,88	0,86	77,44	36,70	0,60	1,26	active
SWEDEN	66,32	50,60	78,86	85,43	0,49	1,05	83,21	45,30	0,20	1,65	active
BULGARIA	26,84	27,76	55,03	67,12	0,08	0,26	66,91	26,30	14,60	0,38	passive
HUNGARY	22,35	32,51	79,58	60,21	0,06	0,24	66,37	9,10	17,70	0,25	passive
LATVIA	17,12	27,48	42,19	56,25	0,04	0,24	71,65	21,00	3,55	0,46	passive
LITHUANIA	25,93	10,91	46,28	49,87	0,04	0,17	52,33	22,00	8,15	0,46	passive
POLAND	18,41	33,93	77,81	31,32	0,05	0,18	48,73	20,20	10,87	0,42	passive
PORTUGAL	12,31	50,56	63,50	60,32	0,06	0,20	63,40	19,50	7,40	0,54	passive
ROMANIA	10,13	19,21	33,33	48,87	0,05	0,19	65,94	11,40	10,03	0,28	passive
AUSTRIA	33,43	40,14	83,74	86,89	0,29	0,44	83,57	33,90	1,71	0,84	mod.-classical
BELGIUM	29,22	39,09	68,38	61,68	0,35	0,61	92,69	34,70	1,78	1,37	mod.-classical
FINLAND	57,44	42,25	74,77	82,13	0,21	0,59	66,83	37,50	3,08	0,83	mod.-classical
GERMANY	37,53	37,20	80,72	81,06	0,06	0,22	80,08	32,80	4,52	0,97	mod.-classical

LUXEMBOURG	24,76	61,47	55,18	79,19	0,32	0,61	88,84	23,30	3,30	1,00	mod.-classical
MALTA	20,75	52,27	81,11	87,32	0,11	0,50	96,09	9,20	6,19	0,70	mod.-classical
SPAIN	36,25	48,06	78,94	81,34	0,10	0,24	74,66	36,00	2,99	0,67	mod.-classical
CROATIA	20,54	20,65	89,39	85,41	0,11	0,36	69,00	21,70	4,59	0,59	mod.-sceptical
CZECH REPUBLIC	24,55	12,88	83,18	46,06	0,16	0,45	69,41	17,00	5,66	1,02	mod.-sceptical
FRANCE	21,35	40,41	65,49	44,68	0,08	0,32	65,74	12,20	1,98	1,42	mod.-sceptical
GREECE	23,73	24,31	91,27	67,21	0,32	0,92	75,94	14,00	2,45	1,36	mod.-sceptical
IRELAND	35,99	32,96	73,19	77,47	0,18	0,56	65,71	13,30	3,26	1,00	mod.-sceptical
ITALY	32,63	34,10	84,43	80,03	0,14	0,44	83,50	11,50	4,05	1,12	mod.-sceptical
SLOVAKIA	15,87	42,82	80,21	57,64	0,18	0,75	76,58	16,70	3,01	0,78	mod.-sceptical
SLOVENIA	21,69	25,26	76,14	54,07	0,17	0,48	68,23	12,20	9,54	0,55	mod.-sceptical
UNITED KINGDOM	28,85	36,19	74,18	66,56	0,11	0,83	69,56	18,10	2,70	1,21	mod.-sceptical

The results of the cluster analysis (see Figure 1) clearly question some (too) simple assumptions on convergence. Though the old European democracies seem to have shared similar democratic institutions and have been exposed to similar processes of globalisation and European integration for a considerable period of time, the most significant difference exists not between the old and the new democracies but between the three north-European countries and the rest both old and new democracies. The seemingly same general processes clearly do not always lead to the same results.

Instead, they may significantly depend on the specific socio-cultural, political and economic settings at the national and regional levels, even in the long run.

Figure 1: Dendrogram for the hierarchical cluster analysis



Following to the hierarchical cluster analysis of the survey data, three major patterns of socio-political participation may be identified:

- 1) The moderate pattern that can be subdivided into two subcategories, namely (a) moderate classical pattern (Austria, Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg, Spain,

- Finland, Malta)⁵ and (b) moderate sceptical pattern (Czech Republic, Italy, U.K., Ireland, France, Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia, Greece)⁶
- 2) The active democracies (Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden)⁷
 - 3) The passive democracies (Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania)⁸

The active democracies are all characterised by intensive political participation of all types. Despite the differences, especially between the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries, they share some typical northern-European characteristics including strong Protestant traditions, early modernisation, strong democratic tradition, long periods of social, political and economic stability.

The passive democracies share clear characteristics as well. They are characterised by the relative lack of all types of active participation. All of them are young democracies that share late modernisation, the lack of democratic traditions and the authoritarian regimes for the most of the 20th Century.

The rest of the European countries belong to what we have called the moderate pattern. This is a significantly bigger and more heterogeneous category. They are all characterised by medium levels of all types of socio-political participation but they significantly differ from each other as well. Some of them, such as Finland or Belgium, are characterised by dense membership and activity in a variety of associations, some of them, such as Spain or France are significantly less so. However, the clearest distinction that prevailed in the cluster analysis is between those with stronger and those with weaker classical political participation. The former – moderate classical – implies

⁵ Characteristics: medium (except Finland) and stable trust, quite high confidence in parliament, high satisfaction with democracy, strong support for democracy, high and stable voting turnouts, modest participation in associations and in non-conventional actions, solid parliamentary representation of women, medium trust in politicians.

⁶ Characteristics: medium trust, medium confidence in parliament, medium trust in politicians, signing petitions is quite common, medium satisfaction with democracy, low proportions of party membership, medium but significantly declining voting turnouts, medium level of participation in associations, low level of women representation.

⁷ Characteristics: politics is considered highly important and interesting and it is often discussed; trust is high and slightly increasing, confidence in parliament is high, politicians are trusted, politics is not considered as too complicated for ordinary people, satisfaction with democracy is high, there is strong support for democracy, high proportions of population belong to political parties, participate at the local level, in human rights and environmental movements, membership and non-paid work in associations is increasing, voting turnouts are high and quite stable, women representation is high, the proportion of people excluded from all kinds of political participation is insignificant, non-conventional participation is relatively high.

⁸ Characteristics: low general trust, low trust in politicians, low confidence in parliament, petitions and unconventional actions are rare, low satisfaction with democracy, comparatively weak support for democracy when confronted with alternatives (strong leader, more order), party membership is rare, low participation at the local level, in human rights and environmental movements, low and mostly declining voting turnouts, low representation of women, significant proportions of population excluded from all forms of political participation, low levels of membership and non-paid work in associations, strong belief that politics is too complicated for ordinary people.

considerable confidence in parliament, high satisfaction with and strong support for democracy, high and stable voting turnouts.

Germany and Austria are perhaps the most typical representatives of this group. Finland, on the other hand, is also close to the active pattern. It is grouped in the moderate category, however, because its classical political participation is lower when compared to the active pattern. Belgium and Luxemburg may be somewhat special cases as well, since their classical political participation may be inflated because of the mandatory voting. In the high citizens' involvement in associations and protest actions Belgium may also be approaching the pattern, though it also has very relevant specifics of its own.

The moderate-sceptical pattern is a combination of the west-European, Mediterranean and Central European countries that share (moderate) scepticism toward the classical forms of democracy, perhaps either because of the underdevelopment of the new democratic institutions (the new democracies) or because of the lack of proper adaptation of the old democratic institutions (Great Britain and France). This very mixture may be an interesting sign of partial convergence between the new and the old democracies – convergence in scepticism toward the classical forms of participation. However, even these signs of convergence may only be accepted with great caution because:

- 1) the scepticism towards the old patterns does not necessary mean the rise of the new patterns: the new political associations are much stronger in Great Britain than in the post-communist democracies;
- 2) the same actions do not necessarily have the same meanings in various socio-cultural settings: very intensive political associational life reported by the Greeks is in striking contrast with their prevailingly negative attitudes towards politics.

3. Discussion: May one speak of convergence?

To what extent may one speak of convergence, according to both survey and qualitative data? Clearly, one may identify some common European (or even global) trends, especially in the long run. The economical, political and cultural aspects of globalisation have affected all European countries, while EU members and candidates have been additionally affected by the institutional convergence required by the EU. The levels of education as one of the significant conditions for political participation have been increasing – though to very different extends – in virtually all European countries. The old social divisions and identities, mostly based on class, have decreased in significance, participation forms have become more individualised, the new issues and new forms of organisations have received increased interest. The extent to which these trends have taken place, however, vary significantly.

The voting turnouts as perhaps the most typical indicator of classical political participation have been decreasing almost universally in European democracies before 1990. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, the signs of divergence appeared when voting turnouts have stabilised in the active and moderate-classical democracies, while the decline has mostly continued in moderate-sceptical and passive democracies. The declining trust in political leaders is far from being a universal trend of post-modernisation in Inglehart's sense. During the 1990s, for instance, the confidence in parliament has remained high and stable in all active democracies, which also belong to the most advanced group of the 'post-scarcity' societies. The rise of the new forms of political participation has ranged from very high levels (especially within the active pattern) to their virtual insignificance (within the passive pattern). It is clear that their development requires much more than institutional convergence with developed European democracies.

This is related to the central question of convergence between the old and the new European democracies. The case of Spain has shown that high levels of convergence are possible, since this country today clearly belongs to the moderate classical democratic model in spite of the lack of longer democratic traditions and the recent authoritarian history. The Spanish case may demonstrate to the younger, post-communist new democracies that convergence is possible, perhaps not in a single but in a few decades. Moreover, after the first decade of democracy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia,

Slovenia and Croatia already seem to belong to the common pattern with some of the old western democracies.

Nevertheless, it is questionable, whether these cases actually confirm any kind of overall convergence. The Spanish data indicate strong classical but weak (though rising) new forms of participation. As far as the latter are concerned, Spain still clearly differs from almost all of the older democracies. The most converging post-communist new democracies also maintain their specifics, such as anti-political attitudes, close to the passive pattern.⁹ Moreover, the most converging post-communist nations seem to have some characteristics that are not shared by the others. The Czech Republic and Slovakia have already experienced a well developed democracy before the 2nd W.W., while Slovenia and Croatia have been relatively open toward the west for a considerable time both because of their geo-political and historical position and because of the relative openness – compared to other communist countries – of the Yugoslav north-western borders.

Parts of the specific socio-cultural features cannot be simply 'imported' by globalisation and institutional Europeisation, and may significantly contribute to divergence in the patterns of political participation.

Some common European (or even global) trends may be identified, especially in the long run. The old social divisions and identities, mostly based on class, have decreased in significance, participation forms have become more individualised, the new issues and new forms of organisations have received increased interest. The extends to which these trends have taken place, however, vary considerably and significant differences remain even in the long run and under the seemingly similar European/global conditions. Consequently the convergence hypothesis may only be confirmed to a very limited extend and with great caution.

⁹ For example, less than 15% of Slovenian consider politics as important according to the EVS/WVS (1999/2000), which is the smallest proportion in Europe. Virtually identical results are provided by the ESS (2003), where Slovenians again considered politics the least important in Europe.

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